Univerzita Karlova v Praze

Filozofická fakulta

Diplomová práce

2011 Jan Hovorka

Univerzita Karlova v Praze

Filozofická fakulta
Ústav anglofonních literatur a kultur

Family in Modern American drama
Rodina v moderním americkém dramatu

Diplomová práce

vedoucí diplomové práce:
Clare Wallace, PhD
Praha, January 2011

Zpracoval:
Jan Hovorka
Studijní obor:
Anglistika a amerikanistika

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 18.01.2011

podpis

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction

The post-war modern American drama portrays family under increasing stress from outside as well as from within. The ideal of a typical family begins to crack as the family units starts to loose its structure and disintegrates to the point of forming surrogate quasi-families or temporary interest groups. The roles inside the family are disturbed; especially poignant is the decline of the patriarch who is disempowered and marginalized. The father becomes an ineffectual figure, distant or often absent, mother is trying to plod on by attempting to keep the family united and the children are highly dissentient. The relationships inside family are severely limited and limiting, there is obvious lack of intimacy and care, the unconditional gave way to the mercenary, friendship to strictly business dealings. All the fundamental changes in family are reflections of the deep changes in society that finds itself on a turn. The changes are expressed in the transition from rural to urban environment and due to dislocations in the fundamental system of beliefs which American society is devoted to and thrives on: the gospel of success, hard work and unlimited possibility. Family thus become an embodiment of such changes and battlefield of the contesting beliefs; the traditional, symbolized by parents or other authority, and the dissentient, which is personified by children who attempt to challenge the status quo.

I have chosen plays where nuclear family is at the center of attention and which serve the intended purpose. My target is an exploration of these forces that are at work and which are acutely manifested within the family unit. I will explore the tensions that arise within family that is under pressure of societal claims, especially in times of profound changes. The post-war era was a time of great crisis of old values and national mythology connected to inevitable success and consequent changes in family mindset as well as its behavior. Family is thus an important indicator and a bearer of such a shift and is usually at odds with societal claims which results in tensions and distress.

1.1. Under Pressure

Family found itself to be under growing strain in the post-war years of the Twentieth century. Due to changing conditions, enormous growth, industrial development and consumerism on the rise not only conditions for life changed but the long cherished ideals of the past era began to loose their value. The change had already begun in previous century when the rural life was replaced by the urban one with great number of people moved to

cities, unprepared for the city realities that posed a challenge to their lives and values. Then, in the 1950s such ideals underwent even grater scrutiny. The American society has always been obsessed with success and appearance, with the intangible tenets of the professed American Dream. Family has been under constant pressure of society, under ubiquitous watchful eyes of the higher authority and its unwritten rules and tacit agreements. Family is caught between the ideals of society, its standards and the fact that such things go through inevitable changes. The changes of social, political and cultural conditions are reflected in the shift of perception of the ostensible ideals that have always represented the blueprint and now stand in sharp contrast with the current sensibilities. The feeling of schism ensues, bringing about the feeling of entrapment and alienation. The revered old beliefs and values are still looked up to but presently cease to retain its relevancy and importance. Such a discrepancy is at heart of the conflicts in the inner dynamics of the American family.

The old virtues and values are, indeed, challenged by the post-war modern drama which seeks after new values in the changed world and endeavors to discard the obsolete ones. It tries to undermine the illusionary securities, confront the petrified values and dispute the dubious ideals as well as to reject old models. To revivify the theater they attempt at a new drama as to the content and form. The path had been paved by their predecessors out of whom Eugene O'Neill was the most notable. His tragic vision of life was in sharp contrast with the ubiquitous optimism and belief in progress and betterment. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller continue in the criticism of the current society and the society's basic constitutive element – family. They are followed by Edward Albee who challenges the illusionary nature of a perfect family, Sam Shepard whose treatment of family is not as caustic as Albee's but involves greater degree of entropy. David Mamet approach is rather indirect as he uses family as an unimportant backdrop of the fierce workings of the predatory capitalism.

The analysis will be focused on two major periods. The first will deal with plays of Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. These plays are concern with the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and its cultural and political implications. The later works focused on are Edward Albee's *The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West* and David Mamet's *American Buffalo* and *Glangarry Glen Ross*. The former group of playwrights seems to form a natural kinship for they experienced similar sociopolitical and cultural milieu and similarity of themes in their works. Albee, Shepard and Mamet, on the other hand, form a heterogeneous group which, nevertheless, shares some related themes and thus they present a natural extension and further

development of the issues explored by Williams and Miller. Williams' and Miller's plays show the family exposed to detrimental effects of the doctrine of success. The characters are in pursuit of the elusive American Dream, where facts and fictions are placed under scrutiny by society in reconciliation of the professed doctrine of inevitable success and the harsh reality that is free of the popular mythology's effect. Mamet portraits an individual exposed to even harsher pressure; pressure to perform and to achieve the objectives influenced by cutthroat competition. Albee hints at the illusions, personal fictions that are created by society and fully internalized by unaware individuals, with the stress upon the necessity of disposing of them. Shepard shares with Albee the incisive irony that works towards undermining the sacred American icons; that is of a family and of success.

It seems that family is both a source of security and distress; it is a safe haven as well as battle ground engaging all its members. It is a very peculiar institution because of its highly contradictory nature – a collective body comprised of staunch individuals. There is relentless fight going on between the two principles. Rugged individualism regularly seems irreconcilable with being responsible to a higher unit of the family. The institution of family is something that one cannot easily escape. Many characters tried to walk away from the responsibility or the stiffening milieu family exudes. At times it is almost impossible to get away from one's family, the ties, roots, responsibilities because they are always there even if one is no more physically connected to it. Arthur Miller affirms the centrality and importance of the family in drama by asserting the following: "the way I see life there are no public issues; there are all private issues."[1] The public thus becomes mere extension of the private. Personal issues are metonymical of public ones. Microcosm of family serves as a metaphor for macrocosm of whole society.

1.2. Family versus Society

The role of the family within society is manifold and has been charted countless times. Apart from its role providing economic support and shelter, emotional satisfaction and reproduction of off-spring, the family is exposed to forces that stem from its political role in society. Abner Cohen views the relationship of an individual and thus of a family as a contractual relationship with society and its symbols. He uses the notion of 'symbols' in expounding the multilayered connection to society. Symbols are described as 'culture',

[1] Christopher Bigsby. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 8.

'norms', 'values', 'rituals', 'myths'. For an individual are myths/symbols fundamental mechanisms for developing their selfhood and for tacking the perennial problems of human existence – life and death, good and evil, misery and happiness, and the like. Cohen cites R.M.Maciver, who asserts that

> every society is held together by a myth system […] all social relations, the very texture of human society, are myth-born and myth-sustained. {…] Wherever he goes, whatever he encounters, man spins about him his web of myths, as the caterpillar spins its cocoon. Every individual spins his own variant within the greater web of the whole group.[2]

But these myths are "almost always manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, in the struggle for, and maintenance of, power between individuals and groups."[3]Cohen claims that individuals are in grip of symbols that help them to make sense of the otherwise meaningless universe. The ambiguity of symbols help us to choose the most fitting meaning out of the range that the particular symbols offer and thus create 'fictitious narrative' or 'symbolical constructions' that gives the world a meaning. Symbols are also important in the maintenance of person's selfhood that is defined by symbolic relations in a society for the interactions with others. The interaction is a way how man discovers his identity. As he claims "social relationships develop through and are maintained by symbols."[4]

Cohen sees the functionality of society based on one basic premise; that is the distribution, maintenance and exercise of power. Whether it is either simple or industrial societies there are extensive patterns of normative, non-rational, non-utilitarian behavior, which play crucial part in the power dynamics. He shows the interdependence of power relationships and symbolic actions in complex society and calls man two-dimensional – political man/symbolist man.

Similarly Pierre L.van den Berghe in *Man in Society: a Biosocial View* observes that man and all human societies are based on power struggle. He holds that man as a 'human animal' with all the attributes of an animal plus additional features learnt, gained by enculturation and 'civilization', is similar to some species of primates and thus dominance ordered. The power ordered societies are formed in a way as to regulate access to scarce resources. He detects that

> many human groups cultivate a fiction of consensus. But scratch the myth of consensus and you typically find a power system, even in communities ostensibly dedicated to egalitarianism and the sharing of resources, such as monastic orders.[5]

---

[2] Abner Cohen, "Preface" in *Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
[3] Cohen, Preface.
[4] Cohen, 30.
[5] Pierre L.van den Berghe, *Man In Society: A Biosocial View* (Elsevier, New York, 1975) 127.

Family is, as well, subjected to a power system and there is identical dynamism of power distribution inside it as in a society. The power derived from seniority, gender and responsibility is ascribed to procreators and power gained from dissent and challenging the authority is attributed to off-spring. Paternalism, according to Berghe, is "probably the most widespread model, and justification, of political rule. In societies with a ruler, emperor, dictator – "the ruler is to his subjects as a father to his children."[6] He considers the family 'a benevolent tyranny' where the two principles are being constantly reconciled. The power struggle and biological heritage are in permanent contest. Berghe also explains violence in terms of the family inner dynamics as

> relations of dominance and submission [that] rest […] on violence or threat of violence [which] is the ultimate argument in a power contest. The average family is no more exempt of violence and conflict than average state, though our ideology concerning the family makes us reluctant to accept that fact.[7]

Violence is hence one of the key aspects of family disintegration and one of the salient features of each play. Family that gave a rise to identical paternalistic structure on the level of society or state is intrinsically similar to society it thrives on, and, at the same time in odds with. The analysis is chiefly focused on the discrepancies palpable in relation to society and its effects on the family. The power of popular myths that are at work in society exerts its authority upon the family to a detrimental effect. The professed myths, ideals or values are hollowed, thus emanating the sense of loss and entropy.

1.3 Family and Theater

One important aspect of the changes in society is the change of theater itself, especially in its subject matter and form. As the concept of family kept changing so did its on-stage representation. We will see the family playing a key role in the analyzed plays, particularly the ideological part it has had throughout the history of the American Theater. The condemnation in the early stage of American colonization, its subsequent penchant for British plays and actors for long decades, its peaks of family importance in the post-bellum period mainly in melodramatic theater, turn to realistic and agit-prop theater, and, later, into the panic-stricken cold-war fifties. Long has been called for a theater that would adequately represent domestic situation and was not mere derivative of other traditions and themes. Unlike the flourishing American novel and poetry the apparent lack of an original American play and utter reliance upon the English plays and style was noticed by prominent writers of

[6] Berghe. 128.
[7] Berghe. 129.

the era, as Christopher Bigsby observed.[8] The necessary adaptation to new conditions were under way so as to reflect the new realities in a different country and, over a period of time, should result in "a new cultural product that spoke not of the abandoned world but of the world in making [as the] old personal and social ties were deserted, nostalgia for the old familiar places and habits were balanced by the necessity of new virtues in the new place." (6) James Fenimore Cooper saw little influence of the theatre upon morals, politics, and the like due to majority of audience comprised of foreigners who were not yet able to grasp the different realities of the New World. Edgar Allan Poe, himself coming from theatrical family, suggested absolute cut off of the current production:

> We must discard all models. The Elizabethan theatre should be abandoned. We need thoughts of our own – principles of dramatic action drawn not from the old dramatists but from the Fountain of Nature that can never grow old. (8)

Walt Whitman felt that even the iconic Shakespeare was not enough for the American purpose as it fell short of " satisfying modern and scientific and democratic American purposes [and could not match] Yellowstone geysers, or Colorado ravines."(8) Similarly, in 1847, he attacked the currently best theatre - the Park – for being "a third rate imitation of the best London theatres [offering] the cast-off dramas and unengaged players of Great Britain [where] everything fits awkwardly."(9)

The ever-present dominance of melodramatic theater was one of the non-representational models. It reigned for over a century before it was challenged. It seemed to nod to a simple ideal of rural life or at least the clearly visible distinctions where everything is seen in simple terms. The insidious modernity began to creep in and life patterns started changing from rural to urban, from product of an individual to monopoly, from rhythm of the nature to the rhythms of technology. This "collapse of Jeffersonian ideal of yeoman" presented a radical change and it was perceived as that "the old virtues were under assault."[9] The opposition of the country and city life started to be presented, usually in favor of the former, as living in city seemed to discontinue the ties to the land, the way of ancestors. As Bigsby observes,

> American audience in the post-Civil War period through 1896 were sentimental and nostalgic […] believing that everything would turn out well at the end. Like their grandfathers they idealized rural life and the Yankee farmer who was simple and honest but could match wits with anyone from the city. […] Rural innocence and purity are contrasted with the corrupting influence of city life.[10]

---

[8] Christopher Bigsby and Don.B.Wilmeth, eds., "Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume I: Beginnings to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 6.

[9] Christopher Bigsby and Don.B. Wilmeth, eds., "Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II: 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 6.

[10] Tice L. Miller, "Plays and Playwrights: Civil War to 1896," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II: 1870-1945*, Christopher Bigsby and Don.B. Wilmeth, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 252.

Similarly, Tice L. Miller asserts that the success of melodramas was due to the fact that after post-war changes pushed people to cities to a different environment the plays "helped them create a sense of identity […] troubled with questions of class and authenticity. They promoted middle class values such as virtue, thrift, hard work, domesticity, and patriotism" [11] It served, as well, as a validation of the audiences' roles as individuals within a society and at the same time offered an escape from the harsher realities of daily life. It thus had a certain therapeutic value and catered to the popular taste of the audience. As Miller claims

> it was not the reality but the myth of America that audience wanted to see in the theatre [as well as the fact that] playwrights aimed for commercial success so it was logical they set their task to please the public, not to offend it.[12]

After the World War I., a fresh and liberating counter-current found its voice in the modern drama with playwrights taking rather critical stance. New, more serious and critical plays that bloomed fully in the late 40s and 50s rebelled against the nostalgia for the past, the blinding power of tradition and naïve beliefs. They sounded the alarm, as Bigsby claims of Miller, "against the coercive power of myth and the constant temptation to deny responsibility for the world we make."[13]

1.4 Socio-political Conditions

The critical voice of the modern American drama has its roots in the cultural heritage explored above. The cultural, however, is naturally related to other fields the society lives in. The soaring economy, political climate and its significance resulted in consequences that were reflected in the arts. Assessing the new values took place in all arts and drama was not an exception and drew on these realities.

1.4.1 Economic Factors

Postwar America seemed to be the best time and place for a family. Remarkable nationwide prosperity was reflected in economic growth in many areas. The gross national product nearly doubled and the

> perpetual economic growth was considered possible, desirable, and, in fact, essential [and] the gap between living standards in the United States and the rest of the world had become a chasm: with 6

[11] Miller, 235.
[12] Miller, 258.
[13] Christopher Bigsby and Don.B. Wilmeth, eds. "Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II: 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 8.

> percent of the world's population, American produced and consumed nearly two-thirds of the world goods.[14]

Massive federal expenditures, new post-war industries and the advantage of American economy over the devastated one of the major industrial nations of the world catapulted manufacturing sky high and created interim monopoly in international trade. Huge federal subsidies triggered an extensive interest in tertiary education. The baby boom resulted in the increase of population by 30 percent and subsequent massive demands for relevant goods, food, toys, etc., and high demand for houses. Unprecedented development of suburban housing occurred and "during 1950s, suburbs grew six times faster than cities [and] suburbia was a dominant social group in American life."(1051)

Moving outside the cities into the country required cars and highways, creating a "car-dependent culture" which "changed the dress, manners, social customs, vacation habits, and the shape of cities, consumer purchasing patterns, and common tastes."(1052) The new houses needed to be furnished with electrical appliances – refrigerators, washing machines, sewing machines, freezers, etc., but one of the most popular product of the soaring economy appeared to be the television set.

Advertising became crucial component of the promoting and selling goods to customers who were being "taught to consume more and more." Also paying for these things was no problem. George Tindall & David Shi use the quotes of the *Newsweek* in 1953: "Never before have so many owed so much to so many" and "time has swept away the Puritan conception of immorality in debt and godliness in thrift."(1055) Consumption encouraged by advertising became the new past time of predominantly white Americans.

It was a time that seemed unrivalled, time, when all dreams seemed to be coming true and the optimism was an intrinsic part of human nature. But there were other issues at stake.

1.4.2 Political Objectives

Besides economic reasons there were fundamental political reasons for promotion of the family life. The post war distribution of markets and political power saw two major contestants who attempted to get as much influence as possible. The Soviet Union and The United States tried to gain as much influence as they could get, each for their own end. Elaine May Tyler in her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* claims the

[14] George Brown Tindall and David E.Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 6th ed. (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2004) 1046.

reason to be the influence across the globe and "war of ideologies". Both sides tried to promote their way of life as considered the best, the most favorable for citizens and economically viable for the state. This was the way they advertised their kind of utopia. Inevitably, due to irreconcilable differences of both systems, it was bound to result in unbridgeable difference in the world view as one system was based on limited individuality, promoting the collective, whereas the other side's philosophy was based on the opposite: property that is private, the encouraged individualism, inalienable right to be successful and happy and on pursuit of that happiness. Such ideologies could not disagree more, which antagonized both sides and as a consequence produced the tacit effort to keep off the danger that is coming from the other side and thus an attempt to gain influence in places around the world so far not affiliated to either side. Both camps promoted the happy life of satisfied citizens by creating popular mythologies – The Soviet Union and its satellites by sheer enthusiasm in rebuilding the damaged country and by taking pride over what they collectively achieved for the greater good and pursuit of world peace. The United States started to market a family life by encouraging families and showing the economic and familial success as a triumph of capitalism. This uniform effort and focus was to ward off the division of society, presenting the ideology as the one. The racially minored people, dissatisfied workers that did not reach the ever present affluence posed a threat to the unity of endeavor and the right course of the ideology. The Cold War, the war of ideologies, was up and running so the leaders, Tyler maintains, turned to family as "the best bulwark against the dangers of the cold war."[15] The family presented traditional gender values, prized the marriage stability, offered seeming security in promoting cultural norms of conformity as a key to security and containment and "many believed that family life would be secure and liberated from the hardship of the past."[16]

The prevailing feeling of the 1950s was that of conformity. The identically looking suburbs, safe middle-class social life, influence and work ethic of large corporations ruled and homogenized people's life by encouraging uniformity. Increasing conformity of businesses and corporate lives left its mark on the families too. The prescribed ideal of a happy family consisted of hard-working father/breadwinner and his wife/mother/homemaker. Whereas men were advocating the masculine ideal of hard-working, persevering individual, women were

[15] Elaine May Tyler, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) 9.
[16] Tyler, 15.

supposed to be experts in creating homey atmosphere. Tindall & Shi quote Life magazine featuring the ideal middle-class woman:

> A thirty-two-year-old, pretty and popular, mother of four, who had married at age of sixteen. An excellent wife, mother, hostess, volunteer, and home manager; she hosts dozen of dinner parties each year, sings in a church choir, works with the PTA and Campfire Girls, and is devoted to her husband. In her daily round she attends club or charity meetings, drives the children to school, does the weekly grocery shopping, makes ceramics, and is planning to study French.[17]

Such an ideal of cheerful coexistence and successful meeting of the suggested values seem to have offered certain psychological security of the right course in the direction to material success and happiness. But there was an invisible counter-current that threatened to undermine the security of the present; the familial dream was challenged and the 'subversive' forces surfaced in the arts and later in the 1960s rebellion.

The shallowness of these ideals, the complacency and conformity was criticized by many. John Kenneth Galbraith *Affluent Society* attacked the vaunt optimism of that time, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* described "fundamental shift in American personality from what he called 'inner-directed' people to the 'other directed' type."[18] Riesman claimed that inner-directed people had set of basic values implanted as an in-built stabilizer; values of the nineteenth century – self-reliance, ruggedness, strong individuality. The other-directed people care how they are perceived by others, adjusting to corporate culture of conformity. "They [don't] follow their conscience so much as to adapt to the prevailing standards of the moment. They [are] more concerned with being well liked than being independent."[19] The phrase 'being well liked' is repeated over and over as a recipe for success by Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. He himself, however, feels alienated and lonely in the crowd of happy individuals. Many other writers described similar sentiments in their novels, be it Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, John Updike or Carson McCullers, to name just a few.

1.4.3 Cultural Countercurrent

The complacency and petrifying conformity was challenged in music and visual art as well. The defiant followers of rock'n'roll that needed their own style and message and broke from the conventions were subjected to a fierce criticism of promoting "a pagan concept of life". Elvis Presley was deemed "a vile symptom of a new teen creed of dishonesty, violence,

[17] Tindall & Shi, 1054-5.
[18] Tindall & Shi, 1059
[19] Tindall & Shi, 1061.

lust and degeneration. Patriotic groups claimed that rock music was a tool of Communist insurgents designed to corrupt American youth." [20] In painting Edward Hopper portrayed lonely individuals with great distance in between; isolated, silent. Jackson Pollock searched for a new way of painting as he claimed that in "the modern painter cannot express this age – the airplane, the atomic bomb, the radio – in the old form of the Renaissance or of any past culture. Each age finds its own technique."[21]

Other artists were looking for new techniques as well. The key figures in the American Drama were looking for the appropriate form that fitted the times. Eugene O'Neill toyed with expressionism and later with so-called "strained realism". Arthur Miller's first major success, *All My Sons,* bore an Ibsenesque realistic heritage. It was Tennessee Williams who created "a poetic theater" in *The Glass Menagerie*. Miller was inspired by Williams and wrote *Death of a Salesman* with fluidity of time where the past meets and influences the present. These were modern approaches to a form using techniques that fitted the given situation better than realism or melodramatic display of heightened emotions.

In the optimistic environment of abundance, material affluence and sentiments that the utopian dreams are finally about to come true, the drama pieces by Williams and Miller must have seemed pessimistic, downright inappropriate and even unpatriotic. In the time of dynamic development and voracious production and consumption, in the time of post-war recovery and expectations of happiness these playwrights presented very different picture of the American individual, the family and thus of the society. Their drama portrayed the alienated individuals that somehow did not fit into the happy picture. Both plays of Williams and Miller were hugely successful and brought fame to both writers. *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* were Broadway successes – both critical and financial.

The doubts went much further than the horrors of the last war and disillusionment with the mankind, the disappointment in the beast-like nature of man and the lost certainties connected to a civilization. The disillusionments of the pre-war Crash - the first major crisis that deeply affected the whole nation - fed into the feeling of dissatisfaction. It was, as Bigsby claims

> proof that the past – its values, its promises, its supposed realities – had very little relevance to a new generation that had to construct itself in the knowledge that all gods were dead, all faiths void, all promises mere deceptions. The animating myth of American society, which had sustained it through its years of growth and plenty, seemed the first and primary victim of collapse which might be economic in form but which was more profound and more disturbing than a mere betrayal of financial hopes. As Miller insists, the Depression 'was only incidentally a matter of money. Rather it was a moral catastrophe, a violent revelation of the hypocrisies behind the façade of American society'[22]

[20] Tindall & Shi, 1062.
[21] Tindall & Shi, 1064.
[22] C.W.E.Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 77.

Depression and the World War II were of a profound effect but the decline could be traced even further back. By the 1900s the frontier was said to be closed. The westward expansion had stopped restricted by the ocean, no more land was to be claimed and thus, in a way, one aspect of the American Dream, the frontier spirit, the ruggedness, the independency and freedom to move ceased to exist. The experience of geographical and spatial limitation, this figurative loss of space or its diminishing had a lasting effect. And thus later, when people lost their savings and jobs the cruel reality was revealed and it was time to sober up and wake up from that failed, dysfunctional dream. "The pre-war world was another country" claims Bigsby [where] "the old values were preserved and celebrated" and which notion was challenged by the new playwrights that suggested the following: "the end of a particular model of America and of individual character. Basic myths having to do with family and community, civility and responsibility, style and grace had dissolved."[23]

[23] Bigsby. 31.

2. Family is Falling Apart

The post-war modern playwrights choose to challenge the mythology connected to the family unit. The criticism aims at this highly promoted institution and the values it represents; values that have been in doubt or dismissed by the playwrights of the Modern American Theater. They attack the emotional core of American sensibility, the sacred concept of the family: the notion of a functional family, the advertised happiness of the unit and all its members, the desired and promoted idealized family units pointing analogously to the similarly ordered society, the politically motivated and implied nationalism. These and other aspects that are relevant to this joyful picture of the family are severely undercut by the playwrights. They present much darker picture. The desired unity is disintegrating, the endless possibilities limited, the vast expanse is shrinking and all this is translated into the family losing its functionality. The family is crumbling and forfeits its intended purpose which illustrates the problematic side of the unit, especially crisis of the belief system the family and society thrives upon.

In treating the following plays portraying family relationships one cannot escape certain simplifications. The themes of loss, entrapment, betrayal and the notion of family disintegration will be discussed but it is quite difficult to treat each play individually and assign to it the most fitting epithet. The trouble lies in overlapping of themes and different level of their intensity which is why the most salient feature of each play was chosen.

2.1 Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller

The Glass Menagerie and *Death of a Salesman* share similar characteristics. In both are families that are dysfunctional. Both units are crumbling as a result of the outside pressure and inside differences, while members of the family are attempting to be true to their roles but frequently fail for number of reasons. The failure inside is mirrored on the outside and vice versa. The incessant effort of the characters on the individual level brings no results; it turns into frustration and despondency and influences the immediate environment, their family. That is why the most pronounced topic of these plays is the profound feeling of *loss.* This feeling is most painfully connected to loss of space, when the physical world seems to be shrinking fast and the physical space diminished by urban development encroaching upon an individual, resulting in the feeling of entrapment. The psychological aspect of this loss results

in a claustrophobic feeling, both within and outside the family, and inevitably leads to the perception of time, space included, as limiting. Time becomes an enemy they tacitly wage war against. The spatial and temporal contraction implies loss of meaning, security and the feeling of temporariness by many of the major characters. The feeling of space diminishing, which occurs mainly in urban areas, is accompanied by reduced opportunities; characters are presented as pressed for time in process of achieving something meaningful. There is a sense of meaning's loss in each individual's endeavors as well as an acute sensation of its profound futility. The characters become restless, confused and lost in a world they increasingly tend to be at odds with. The elusive ideal of hard work, pursuit of happiness and frugality rewarded prescribed by society - strikingly different from the post-war realities - has most disastrous consequences and generally amounts to a failure. This is inevitably translated into the sense of personal failure. The pressure to succeed arising from within an individual as well as from the outside, the society, becomes painfully urgent in all daily activities, and changes in time into something close to an obsession and paranoia. The problem lies in many features of the post-war period. The anxiety arising from lessening possibilities, closure of the Frontier, challenged masculinity of breadwinners, the narrow definition of success only in terms of acquirement of material things - these are just some of them.

The old customs are hard to break. The old myth concerning the American way of life are questioned, challenged and invalidated. Still, the parents acutely feel the obligation to hand down the views they consider right by the society's standards as the correct ways of conduct for their posterity. The children are intrinsically opposed to those creeds and deem them false and dysfunctional. The issue of natural respect towards parents and their leadership becomes problematic and increasingly unacceptable. Offspring try to search for alternatives and found themselves similarly lost and in between of two dysfunctional worlds, in the impasse. The generational gap is wide and further deepened by the opposing philosophies of both camps. There is an evident disruption in the family's dynamics. While mothers validate the current principles, the paternal figure loses authority and becomes ineffectual. The gravity of the father figure is compromised by his failure in his professional and personal life. He is often not present at all, leaving the dissatisfactory relationship or escaping the physical and psychological entrapment. Men usually struggle to act upon the masculine ideal they feel they should represent and battle with their frustration when the endeavor fails.

Such a division between parent and child, the crisis in identity and masculinity, the ubiquitous sensation of loss, the limited space and time, is then transformed into dysfunctional

family relationship where the feeling of entrapment and entropy pervades and develops into a crumbling unit.

2.1.1 Entrapment, loss and escape – *Death of a Salesman* and *The Glass Menagerie*

The feeling of entrapment pervades both Williams' and Miller's on-stage families. It cuts across the generations and genders. The similarities of both feeling the same way about the conditions are followed by irreconcilable dissimilarities for both parties. The widespread solution of the predicament is the attempt to avoid the trouble, not necessarily to solve it. Thus the frequent feature of the characters is their resort to an escape. They flee the difficulties physically or mentally in attempt to get away from the omnipresent feeling of entrapment.

In Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* an apt example of such sentiments is set right in the beginning of the play. The Wingfield family lives in an apartment building that is described as

> one of those hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growth in overcrowded urban centers of lower-middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this large and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism." [1]

Williams uses expressions like 'conglomerate', 'enslaved', 'automatism', which interestingly echo George Orwell's *1984*, the dystopian place and its inhabitants. The apartments are entered by a fire-escape that rest upon the building as a reminder of technological dominance, a bar-like construction enveloping and restricting. Williams' symbolism behind the fire-escapes points towards metaphorical fires inside the homes. The buildings house the burning "fires of desperation", being "slow and implacable", symbolizing the seemingly inescapable fate of its tenants. This implies the spatial extent of their predicament; the loss of space. Affected by rapid development of houses growing in close vicinity to each other, encroaching upon each other's spatial demands, they are leaving the tenants with little room for themselves, thus restricting their movement and disempowering them. The restricted space to move entails certain loss of freedom to move, a sense to be trapped in one place, one job, a nightmare. Similarly, characters in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* suffer the lack of appropriate space. Their little house is dwarfed by the surrounding soaring apartment buildings; to look up at the sky you "gotta break your neck to see the stars

[1] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* in *Penguin Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959) 233.

in this yard."[2] Throughout the play Willy Loman's remarks that are connected to the lack of space and natural light appear: "You can't see nothing out here! They boxed in the whole goddam neighborhood!"(2170), and again in the following paroxysm, a feeling close to suffocation:

> WILLY: Why don't you open a window in here, for God's sake?
> LINDA: [*with infinite patience*] They're all open, dear.
> WILLY: The way they boxed us in here. Bricks and windows, windows and bricks.
> LINDA: We should've bought the land next door
> WILLY: The street is lined with cars. There's not a breath of fresh air in the neighborhood. The grass don't grow any more, you can't raise a carrot in the back yard. They should've had a law against apartment houses. Remember those two beautiful elm trees out there? When I and Biff hung the swing between them?
> LINDA: Yeah, like being a million miles from the city.
> WILLY: They should've arrested the builder for cutting those down. They massacred the neighborhood. (2114)

The Lomans are surrounded by other apartment buildings that are looming high and thus make their dwellings look smaller in size and importance; pressing down on its inhabitants, creating the sensation of suffocation. The Lomans' house has an important role in the play as it symbolizes the independency, financial and spatial, as well as certain material achievement, which implies satisfaction. It is a place of safety, shelter from inclemency that is threatened and diminished in size and importance by the apartment buildings; the hostile outside world pushing on the fragile little adobe. Willy remembers the two elm trees – a certain reminder of the country inside of the city – that were in the way of the construction and needed to be removed. Willy's indictment concludes that since then nothing grows there anymore due to lack of soil and sunlight; implying the deadening effect of the construction, the natural world ravished by the urban.

The ever-present sense of spatial pressure, the loss of unrestrained space, of the promising and vast frontier is connected to a certain loss of meaning, the loss of direction, the loss of understanding. The existence in an unanchored life, struggling for the meaning, feeling deceived and directionless, result in a bitter sentiment of betrayal. Each character tries to solve their dilemma differently, but there is the unifying notion of the *escape*. Characters abscond their meager conditions in search of a relief. The escape materializes in two fundamental ways – the physical and psychological; sometimes both are intertwined.

All characters find a different solution. Tom, in *Menagerie*, finds a way out by leaving his job and family behind - most of all he desires to retain his sanity. Willy finds the meaning and justification in escaping his painful life into death. He seems to have lost his sanity and now

[2] Arthur Miller. "Death of a Salesman," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 6th ed., Nina Baum, et al., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 2133.

this is the ultimate and only possible solution should he preserve his dignity. Laura, Tom's sister, chooses living in the harmless poetic world of her menagerie, escaping the harsh outside world, opting for the inner, idealized life. Happy, in *Salesman*, remains devoted to the business milieu. But he also feels unsatisfied, and escapes into a world of material and sensual pleasures. Biff, his brother, with growing feeling of refusal the commerce rat-race, tries to escape into a country life but is well aware of the futility of it. Mothers are the opposites. Amanda and Linda cling to their role of a mother - supporting, soothing, encouraging. Linda, especially, tries to fulfill the ideal of a good homemaker, sacrificing herself for the family well being, thus constantly reinstating the current status quo and reinforcing Willy's spuriousness.

The male characters feel insubstantial. They are frustrated as they perceive the wasted effort, effort to do something one tries to achieve but the more one tries the further it seems to be getting away. The aggravation is mixed with painful awareness of something more than just a personal predicament. Willy Loman possesses such feelings of unfulfilled dreams and wasted energy. He lumbers on in conditions which do not allow him to reach what he aims for; the more he tries the more desperate he gets out of sheer frustration and exhaustion. His space for maneuvering has shrunk considerably, his possibilities have diminished, his dream of success is getting further and he feels the need to blame; something or somebody. He has chosen the metonymical apartment buildings – "windows and bricks, bricks and windows" – as a representation of the world where his options are limited due to, as he sees it, "more people! That's what ruins this country! Population is getting out of control. The competition is maddening!"(2117) He lists the supposed ills of the country, the justifications why he has not succeeded. These impromptu verbal attacks, which are rather cries of desperation than any consistent effort to list the obstacles, show his depth of frustration. Willy often slips into contradictory exclamations which show the degree of his desperation. "Biff, he's lazy bum" and within a space of a half page: "That's the thing about Biff, he's not lazy!"(2117)
Willy feels "temporary", which points to a sense of an unanchored, directionless being, frustrated from the success avoiding him. He is seeking help, directions. He asks for help his brother in their imaginary conversation: "Ben, I have been waiting for you for so long! What's the answer? How did you do it? […] What's the secret?" (2130, 2152)
His feeling of inadequacy is palpable in his frustration over losing material things, the one of the only tangible proofs of his modest success:

> Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken! […] I'm always in a race with the junkyard! I just finished paying for the car and it's on its last legs. The refrigerator consumes belts like a goddam maniac.(2142)

The material possession is a certain mark of a status and achievement. Once it is broken the frustration ensues and points symbolically to a loss of the status and importance. Working on getting the symbolic success back he seems to feel the weight of Sisyphean task upon him.

He is too tired to go on and becomes anxious because he senses little chance of success. In search for solution the fancies the closest people to help. Willy wants to force his sons to help him finish his failed dream for him, to carry on his line of business, to leave them the legacy of his hard work.

Tom in *Menagerie* suffers similar frustration and is also 'boiling inside' threatening the slowly burning fire of desperation one day to brim over. He feels caught in the endless circle of disgruntling activities. In the meantime, he frequently visits movie theaters to get away from the daily discontent and away from his pushy and ever-instructive mother. He cannot stand such a monotonous, dissatisfactory life so he decides to act:

> TOM: I'm planning to change. I'm at the point of committing myself to a future that doesn't include the warehouse and Mr. Mendoza or even a night-school course in public speaking.
> JIM: What are you gassing about?
> TOM: I'm tired of the movies.
> JIM: Movies!
> TOM: Yes movies! Look at them – [*A wave towards the marvels of Grand Avenue*] All of those glamorous people – having adventures – hogging it all, gobbling the whole thing up! You know what happens? People go to the *movies* instead of *moving*! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventure for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watch them have them! […]I'm tired of the *movies* and I'm *about to move*![3]

The spatial restraints, the diminishing room for proverbial movement is one of the causes of Tom's aggravation. Not moving thus signifies entrapment in a prison-like place void of any meaningful future. A person becomes a dispensable part of inhuman machine which commodifies all its elements. Tom attempts to escape by joining The Union of Merchant Seamen. He "lights out" as if for the new territory and travels around "attempting to find in motion what was lost in space."(313) He travels from town to town but cannot stop because he is compelled by an unseen force to go on. It is partially his restlessness and impatience as well as the infatuation with moving, which is much similar to his father's who "was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances."(235)

The image of being stuck, the challenged and undone myth of self-sufficiency, the sensation of having no possibility of moving ahead is also in Willy's mind. He has come to a

[3] Williams, *Menagerie* 282.

decision and is about to move too. After experiencing series of disappointments, he has found a solution that will be both Willy's redemption and his sons' head start and advantage.

His plan of reinstating his impact in the Loman's kingdom of success by employing his sons has failed. Biff, Willy's main hope in continuing the line of rugged individualists and successful entrepreneurship, has also failed. But Willy's stubbornness and blind faith in the tenets of the Dream make him resort to an action to retain his personal dignity, to prove he was right when he chose his career, to prove he was right to believe in his dreams. "Can you imagine that magnificence with twenty thousand dollars in his pocket? […] Oh, Ben, I always knew one way or another we were gonna make it, Biff and I!"[4] Willy's last step is the only one he considers proper to secure the well-being of his son and to justify his past decisions. He has made up his mind – he will conquer the one ultimate frontier he has left in his existence.

Both the warehouse worker and the salesman are anxiously searching for a way out. As Willy moves to a place where he surrenders his life, Tom is moving on; out of the strictures that afflict him, away from the limitation of home and family, out into the open, to the unknown. The hope-giving idea of a place beyond, far away, with unlimited space, a haven of imaginary autonomy and uncompromised meaning is characteristic escape destination for almost all male protagonists; particularly Tom, Willy and Biff. This notion of the open country as a metaphor for freedom, opportunity, unlimited possibility, of a redemptive flight into a different world is shared by both *Salesman* and *Menagerie*.

Biff, Willy's son, is trying to find an escape route to more satisfactory life. He feels he has found it in the opposite of what the urban jungle is; the world out in the open. Biff has experienced series of failures and comes to a realization that Willy's dreams are false and unrealistic. He is caught in a quandary – between respecting his father and his intentions, and his own individuality and independence. Like Tom, he tries to escape the dilemma and suffocation of his family, by drifting around, doing seasonal work. Unlike Tom, who finds the first possible pretext to escape, Biff seems to have a particular solution in mind. What he seems to enjoy is laboring on a farm. "This farm I work on, it's spring there now, see? And they have got about fifteen new colts. There's nothing more inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt."(2117) Such a notion of the open country is not foreign to Willy, either. He tries to plant some seeds around his house and remembers the past when his father had traveled the country and had been selling his hand-made products. Both Biff and

[4] Miller, 2174.

Willy are fascinated by the pastoral ideal of the rural life; a life that is superior to the current urban existence of diminished possibilities, but also a life that no longer exists and survives only as a nostalgic recollection in the characters' inner landscape, somewhere in the golden past. The myth of the boundless space is perceived as one possibility of getting away; as one form of meaningful existence, one last hope they adhere to.

Even though Tom and Biff find different solution, their personality and status is similar. They are the rebels of both families, both semi-dependant sons with obligations to their families. They are naturally rebellious in challenging the parents' authority and also unsatisfied with the status quo they attempt to escape, having serious doubts about the validity of the American Dream. They seem to be existing rather in the shadow, the dark side of the dream. Their attempt to escape the limiting conditions is, however, dissatisfactory. Tom is pursued by ghosts of the past, searching for the meaning and reconciliation but finding none. Biff recurrently escapes to the country but finds only temporary satisfaction. Both are caught in the limbo of temporariness that amounts to similar failure as his parents'; in a world in between two realities none of which seems to be functional. Neither finds his peace in the country – Biff's flight into the country is only a momentary solution. He keeps coming back to the safe haven of home to face the authoritarian father and his preposterous claims. Tom escaped the stifling familiarity and ends in impersonal obscurity, haunted by his past.
Even the compliant Happy, Biff's brother, at times shows his discontent, even though he is much more prone to believe in the workings of the Dream. Willy is a father figure that he respects and trusts. He is willing to continue in Willy's dream because he believes in its validity. Still, his doubts surface now and then.

> All I can do now is wait for the merchandize manager to die. And suppose I get to be the merchandize manager? He is a good friend of mine, and he just built a terrific estate on Long Island. And he lived there about two months and sold it, and now he's building another one. He can't enjoy it once it's finished. And I know that's just what I would do. I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment-all alone. And think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely.(2118)

What Happy is hitting at is the obvious restlessness and his own dissatisfaction, which he has hard time to admit. He is too conforming and indoctrinated to try a different life, unlike his brother Biff. Happy is an extension of Willy and the antithesis of his brother.

What connects both plays is the notion of time. The physical loss of space influences the perception of time. Time acquires urgency. Similarly as space, time seems to diminish. It surfaces in the perceived lack of it, the narrowing space limiting the time given to achieve. It

becomes yet another dimension to the loss of space. The plays deal with the rush or lack of time, the past, present and future. There is the pressure of now, the exigency to act to "get ahead of the next fella" [5] as well as the undeniable influence and product of the past and of what happened. The past, especially, plays very important role in both pieces.

Time influences everybody in a different ways. There is seemingly less time to achieve success, to prepare, to think, to act. Even the escape of some characters is triggered by time pressure. Time itself is a grave matter in the capitalistic society. It is considered precious as the monetary worth is assigned to it. Time thus becomes a commodity that is valued dearly. This is recognized and respected by almost all characters except Biff in *Salesman* and Tom in *Menagerie*. They refuse to be limited by the time-is-money doctrine. So does *Menagerie*'s Laura. She has chosen to ignore the implied value of present time and decides on escaping into a timeless place, somewhere the impact of the outside prosaic world and the effect of clicking clock are minimized almost absolutely. The escape thus has rather temporal extent than spatial.

"The time is short and it doesn't return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition."[6] This quote from Williams' essay summarizes the predicament virtually all his central characters grapple with - the passage of time and its irreversibility. Williams describes how "the corrupting rush of time" robs our lives of dignity and meaning. That is, perhaps, why so many of his characters try to fight the time either by actively fighting it as Chance in *Sweet Bird of Youth* or by recoiling into timeless place and thus cutting themselves from the reality as Laura in *Menagerie*. Chance has chosen the opportunistic, self-destructive, masculine approach to get ahead to find himself emasculated at the end. He "tried to compete, make himself big as these big-shots […] He went. He tried. The right doors wouldn't open, and so he went in the wrong ones."[7] Laura, on the other hand, does not try to compete. She withdraws as a defense against the harsh realities the family has to come to terms with. While the solution for others is an escape to a place somewhere else, hers is to stay and escape into her own world.

Laura in *Menagerie*, similar to Blanche in *Streetcar Named Desire*, represents passivity and penchant for olden times. She has opted for the inner life, for the harmless and satisfying

[5] Miller, 2116.
[6] C.W.E. Bigsby, "Entering the Glass Menagerie" in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roundané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 32.
[7] Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth* in *Penguin Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959) 63.

past that no longer exists, for the other world that once might have existed; the world that is rather of her own making. It is a world, according to Bigsby, of "desire to live with comforting fictions, rather than confront brutal truths". [8] Her escape does not have the spatial dimension as Tom's but rather a psychological.

She has withdrawn from common life into her own imagined one of glass animals, old worn out records and memories. Laura tries to defy time with freezing it in one happy moment and to fence off all intrusive influences. As Blanche in *Streetcar* she creates her own personal fictions as a protection against the unfriendly world. Laura focuses on and lives in the past instead of the future. She lives in a fantasy world. Her glass menagerie suggests her impractical and fragile disposition and inclination to poetic myths and dreams. The glass animals are her only friends, the only flawless landscape where she can live with her imagination unharmed because behind the door there is a wild and cruel world full of strangers. She is too fragile for the brutal outside world of business. She is too delicate to withstand the pressures of the everyday, and appears unable to finish her high school or even the course of typing. Existing "like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf"[9] this is also emphasized by the consequences of her childhood illness resulting in one shorter leg. Laura is extremely self-conscious, falling deeper and deeper into her exile, as Williams describes in the play's beginning in the character description. Her high school recollection of Jim, the bitter-sweet memory of the past, materializes one evening when both meet. Jim, enchanted by Laura, looks through her collection.

> JIM: A unicorn, huh?
> LAURA: Mmmmmm-mmmmm!
> JIM: Unicorns, aren't they extinct in the modern world?
> LAURA: I know!
> JIM: Poor little fellow, he must be sort of lonesome.
> LAURA [smiling]: Well, if he does he doesn't complain about it. (301)

Williams quite often suggests the symbolism of props on the stage. Here Jim and Laura do not talk only about the collection but about Laura herself. She gets metaphorically transformed into the unicorn, into the extinct and thus unworldly animal that is of glass and thus highly susceptible to physical and mental breakdown.

Now, as a visitor, it is Jim who is unaware of his unintended role of a gentleman caller this evening, and so the subsequent clash of reality and illusion result in a disaster. He is, seemingly, the last connection Laura has had with the outside world that has been severed. After this disappointment Laura falls deeper into her imaginary world. Breaking of the horn of

[8] Bigsby, *Entering*, 35.
[9] Williams, *Menagerie* 228.

the glass unicorn, the favorite animal in her collection, symbolizes the fragility of her fictional existence, falling apart of her childish dreams. Bigsby suggests that it is, on a different level "something more than end of a private romantic myth. It marks the end of a phase of history, of a particular view of human possibility".[10] She, at times, also serves as a symbol of the fragile and poetic that is being crushed by the prosaic. She is a part of the consciousness that, through Blanche, demands: "I don't want realism […] I'll tell you what I want. Magic! [*Mitch laughs*] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people."[11] Laura's escape into timelessness and unworldly place is symptomatic to the common sense of loss. It is just one form of fighting with the pressure implied by time (and space) shortage. Other characters, however, cannot ignore it and try to fight in their own ways. The present is in the grip of both the past and the future.

The characters feel like Willy Loman, "sort of temporary". The loss of physical space considerably influences the mental state of the family, its perceptions of the possibilities and chances for success. The faster pace of the urban environment the more it seems to be at odds with the more nature-conditioned rural. There are psychological motivations to escape to a better world. It is a world that is free of present limitations and offers temporary satisfaction, even though it is illusionary. The better world could be represented by a farm that symbolizes character's longing for the bucolic ideal in *Salesman* or realized in retreat to a poetical world as in *Menagerie*.

Both plays, however, deal with time in a different way. If *Menagerie* implies looking back, residing in the innocuous past, *Salesman* implies the future. Willy looks forward, makes plans, lives for what is coming. For Laura future means unwanted struggle and pain. For Willy future is sacred. For her it represents menace, for him it is promise of realized possibilities unfeasible at present. However, both equally share past influence on the present; here, both past and present are intertwined, ensuing in the fluidity and inseparability of them both. But the past is not a dead matter. It does not bring only the feeling of connectedness and community unbroken, it has an adverse effect. It invokes the feeling of guilt connected to past trespasses that haunt and influence the present.

While Laura thrives on the past, it is the thing Willy tries to get away from. It is because for Willy the roots of his failure originate there. He concentrates on the present and future. According to the doctrine of the American Dream every person should be free in every

[10] Bigsby, *Entering*, 36.
[11] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *Penguin Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959) 204.

respect; that, equally, includes not being influenced by the past, free of historical determinism. Williams and Miller, however, deny this and claim the virtual impossibility of severing the ties connected to and derived from the past. It is not merely the idyllic past of the rural life, the utopian notion of the idyllic beauty of the countryside or of the frontier with the infinite possibilities - this is yet another past that, in a substantial way, influences the present as a painful reminder of the past.

Pains of the past, transgressions and guilt – all these converge in the present moment in *Salesman*. The past has enormous consequences in the present and possibly in the future. Willy's imagined conversations with his successful brother Ben, his role model, materialize through him. Ben belongs to the past of rugged individualism, pertinent to its values, to a different era. Willy resurrects the ghost of the past, the different way of life and acts upon it as he believes in the course of his endeavor. Willy's transgression with the woman in Boston hotel has had a lasting effect upon his relationship with Biff. Willy, too, feels guilty he has not lived up to the expectations of his dreams, has not reached the fulfillment he desires, has not met the requirements of achieving his version of the American Dream. He is aware of the failure he represents as well as the fact he failed to recognize that his dreams have been wrong, that he bought too much into the mythology of the dream; the dream that is changing as the conditions for getting to it are changing.

Past transgressions are thus constantly present in the present. Driven by the guilt characters are determined to secure the future, to amend the past wrongdoing. But there never seems to be enough time. Willy feels the pressures, the limited room, spatial and temporal, and is anxious to delegate his mission to his posterity. Tom, as well, suffers the pangs of consciousness, yet in a different way. He escapes the inhibition of his family environment. It is a painful decision but his personal integrity is more important than the sacrificial gesture of enduring the conditions. He carries a burden that afflicts him; it is the feeling of guilt towards his family, especially to his sister Laura. He is driven by guilty conscience, seemingly without the possibility to come to a halt.

> I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass – […] I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be![12]

Tom demonstrates a great measure of restlessness and impatience as he wants to live a different life. What connects Willy and Tom is their impatience; the quality that is provoked by the passing time, or rather their awareness of their impossibility to stop it and the limited

[12] Williams, *Menagerie* 313.

possibilities. It suggests losing youth, diminishing promises, falling into oblivion. It is a painful reminded evenly to both generations - to parents and their children.

Parents, however, are restless and anxious for different reasons. One of them is the aim to achieve security. While Willy claims to feel 'sort of temporary' in his world, thinking of ways to secure his boys a place in the system, considering the future for them, Amanda is, too, obsessed with the future. She also searches for some successful, tangible outcomes of her strivings. The following confirms her worries: "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?"[13]

Amanda's dramatic exclamation 'what is the future?' epitomizes her fear of the great unknown in case she fails her role. The homemaker and partially the breadwinner, she dreads the unsecured times to come. There is a highlighted sense of the loss of security in both cases of anxious parents. It is apparent in both plays - *The Glass Menagerie,* a play taking place during the Depression and *Death of a Salesman,* a play haunted with its specter. As Bigsby asserts the Depression

> was an experience that shaped both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams who began to write […] in the thirties. This pre-history formed many of their assumptions, defined their themes and explains something of the pressure exerted on their characters.[…] The loss of dignity and self-assurance which Miller saw as one legacy of the Crash clearly left its mark on Willy Loman as it did on Amanda Wingfield. [14]

Both characters, as a result, feel a strong urge to achieve security at any cost. Amanda wants and needs to protect herself, but mainly it is Laura she has in mind. Willy tries to reach some level of comfortable security for himself and his family by providing the necessary - both materially and spiritually. Both are equally burdened with the duty of a parent as a society member. Responsibility for their children and, implicitly, to the society, is one of the key aspects of both situations. Both have offspring that are far from the ideal of successful denizen in the ideal land of unlimited possibilities, phenomenal successes and bright futures. Both share the inbred trait of urging their offspring to continue in their parents' footsteps, push for conformity with the prescribed ideals of patience, hard work and inevitable success, advocating the values they learnt were true and functional. They try their best and worst to prompt their children to act. There is a double bind that quite often appears irreconcilable and contradictory as they try to strike a balance between raising children, in accordance with the parent instincts, and society's demands; demands that lay strong claim upon an individual. It is an incessant strife between individualistic and collective implications of the self.

---

[13] Williams, *Menagerie* 242.
[14] Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 69.

Both parents, Willy and Amanda, share a lot and differ on little. Even though different gender they share many traits, particularly as parent figures. Williams describes Amanda as an exceptional woman:

> there is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person. [15]

It fits perfectly the description of Willy as well as he shares the same characteristics and propensities. In Williams' notes for *Menagerie* he also adds the following about Amanda: She is "of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place" (228) Willy Loman is not different. Not only share the plays similarities in characters of Amanda and Willy, in their endeavor, they bear resemblance in similar rhythm. Both are copious in profuse verbal dominance as the parent characters; in their vital, encouraging pep talk with overtones of unbridled optimism. They abruptly turn into fierce verbal attacks and accusations, contradictions and desperation that are soon enough changed into iron resolve to march on with the banner of faith in the future, all this encouraged by almost a maniacal optimism. This constant fluctuation sharply up and steeply down are quite reminiscent of manic depression.

Amanda and Willy are products of another time and place. They both believe in the doctrine of hard work, self-reliance and its subsequent favorable results. Even though both represent the same sensibilities, Willy is more an epitome of the tradition of rugged individualism, self-reliance, frontier courage, determination and industriousness. Amanda, on the other hand, believes in the same doctrine of hard work, but she replaced ruggedness with other characteristics – she is endowed with patience, tenacity, resourcefulness and empathy. Here she functions more as a homemaker than a breadwinner. Still, both have the same aim – to secure their children by educating them by transfer of their own knowledge and world view, pushing the offspring to act. Both are acting as exemplary parents. They operate along the lines of current expectation, along the gendered distinction and the prescribed roles. While Willy aspires to be the masculine ideal of a father, Amanda struggles to be the feminine. The breadwinner and the homemaker, respectively, are the popular terms parents are enticed to fulfill. For their elusive nature, however, these terms are as intangible as the American Dream itself.

Willy wishes to represent the rugged ideal of the Dream. His own family is his role model. Father, who left when Willy was young, was a self-made man. He was an artisan and traveled

[15] Williams, *Menagerie* 228.

the country and later went to Alaska (which bears an apt nickname: "The Last Frontier"). His brother, Ben, left to Africa to search for diamonds. Both left to pursue the ideal of the frontier, towards the boundless possibilities. They are portrayed as real men – sharing the characteristics the masculine ideal an American male should have. Only Willy chose to stay in a city with the idea of "making it big" there, conquering the frontier of traveling salesman, setting out to new territories to disseminate his goods and smiles. Willy tries to raise his boys in a similar way his model acted: "That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben – rugged, well-liked, all-around."[16] Willy solicits pieces of the advice from Ben that are saturated with the qualities he sees appropriate – the image of a jungle, fight, perseverance, getting rich. The directions from Ben "never fight fair with a stranger, boy" are followed by examples of courage and self-sufficiency: "[or] you'll never get out of the jungle that way […] I walked into a jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And by God I was rich!"(2131) These are seen by Willy as the recipe for successful life: "…was rich! That's just the spirit I want to imbue them with! To walk into a jungle! I was right! I was right! I was right!"(2132) Willy lists the advantages his boys possess to get ahead. They are "built like Adonises"; thus he stresses the look because "the one who makes an appearance gets ahead" as well as the need to be "dressed to an advantage", and have an charisma since "personality always wins the day". What Willy sees as essential in business are fundamentally two things: the hardened personality and good looks.

Beside the two essentialities – the personality and appearance – the old style of business dealings is invoked. It is based on close, intimate relationship. The wishful thinking presents the situation what would happen if all went well: "It'd be the family again. There'd be the old honor, and comradeship, and if you wanted to go off for a swim or somethin' – well, you'd do it! Without some smart cooky getting' up ahead of you!"(2138) Unfortunately, these criteria belong to the previous age and do not apply now, while the ideal is in sharp contrast with the current business situation: murderous, maddening, and predatory. There is lack of comradeship and intimacy as the friendly turns into the cut-throat.

Amanda sticks to the function prescribed by her gender. She is also influenced by the old ideal, the myth of endless possibility. Exempt from the pressure of masculinity she performs her role in a different way but according to the function her gender requires – she is the perfect mother and responsible citizen.

[16] Miller, 2131.

Amanda and Willy try their best to manage the multi-role engagement. This includes all kinds of sometimes contradictory roles: provider and consumer, supporter and challenger, teacher and judge, friend and foe; usually at the same time. As a member of wide community their focus is on propagating the convictions of the society as the assumptions of the covert claims are imposed by the American society. The most prominent feature is thus transformed into pressure imposed onto the children. In American society it is the culture of success that is so compelling. The mighty dynamics of conforming to one's culture seems inescapable and exerts great pressure onto its target. Offspring, naturally dissentient and questioning the status quo, are, however, perceptive of the fallacy. The proclaimed conduct is in sharp contrast with the real state of things and they refuse to participate in the faulty process of running such a 'machine'. Both, parent and child, are exposed to irreconcilable choice between subjugation to collective system and retaining their own uncompromised individuality and integrity; that is, the identity. This predicament lies in the heart of the relationship of parent/child and is instrumental in disclosure of frictions between concepts of individuality and collectiveness.

Such a conflict surfaces in both *Menagerie* and *Salesman*. In both the conflict parent/child stays in the center. Even though Amanda and Tom are valid pattern of the contesting philosophies, Willy and Biff are much better example. Willy, thanks to his gender role, is more extreme proponent of the doctrine of success than motherly Amanda. The same applies to the children. Where Tom just walks away in attempt to solve his problems, Biff cannot. Tom is haunted by recollections of leaving his sister behind in Amanda's household. But Laura's world, even though limited, is blissful as far as she is able to guard her poetic utopia.

Biff's world and world of his father's failed dreams pertain to much harsher conditions. Offspring is torn between natural respect to a parent and own identity. In the the grip of society, man, the natural breadwinner, is more prone to feel the pressure of his culture on performance. Once this aspect declines and he is no longer able to provide satisfactorily, his identity is in question. The ideal of masculinity suffers greatly; his worth becomes uncertain as the ideal is in doubts. Biff is entrapped because he cannot easily walk away; he would destroy the last firm footing Willy has left. He would compromise Willy's belief that his son will continue in his footsteps and built what Willy has failed to.

The fiercest battle of ideas is clear in the clash of two generations. In the family it is usually the parent-child relationship that is most tested. Where the schism is most exposed is in the father-son relationship in *Salesman*. Both men behave upon their masculine impulses to act as an individual, to be independent as well as to dominate, to lead. Both are caught in a double-edged issue that is hard to be resolve due to the men's opposing pulls.

Death of a Salesman, indeed, hinges on the father-son relationship. It is revelatory of the embedded differences between diverse values. Willy is a man trapped in the world that is in transition. For him the truism that all things evolve and leave behind those, who cannot adapt, applies. Willy is a product partially of himself and partially of his environment. He belongs to a world that is slowly ceasing to exists, world that used to have relevance for his father and brother Ben, where the frontier spirit, ruggedness, self-reliance, determinism, tenacity and big dreams seemed to work without inhibition. Willy must have felt the tacit requirement of the Dream of the inevitability of becoming somebody, of achieving success. He claims that when he met the salesman David Singleman, the 84 year-old salesman he himself decided to become a salesman,

> he'd drummed merchandise in thirty-one states. And Old Dave, he'd go up to his room, y'understand, put on his green velvet slippers – I'll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers , and without ever leaving his room he made a living. And when I saw that I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want.[…] In those days there was personality in it., Howard. There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it. Today it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear-or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me any more. (2146)

With the feeling that he could not be anything else he embarked on a salesman career. His immense believe in the older version of the American Dream and the successful examples around brought him to where he is standing now, more than 36 years later when the dream has not materialized yet and the more he is trying the further it seems to be getting away from him. Once it looked so close now it is very distant as if it never existed. Willy's fatal flaw is his boundless trust in the Dream, even though he comes to realization that its façade shows numerous cracks; but he, nevertheless, keeps trying to succeed. He is aware that he has failed, that the dream he has kept alive in his daydreaming was an illusion. It might have worked for others but it has not worked for him. His awareness of the failure is presented in the contradictory language he uses throughout the play when he reveres and a while later despises the products of economy: "Chevrolet, Linda, is the greatest car ever built. […] I'm not going to pay that man! That goddam Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!"(2125) The irony remains that Willy is better in other job than what he does. His neighbor, Charlie, claims that "was good with his hands" and "a happy man with a batch of cement". Biff asserts that "there is more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made." Willy only "didn't know who he was." (2175)

But can he publically admit his mistake? As he is in the role of a father, the main figure, the respected patriarch, who cannot, must not confess that he was wrong. There are forces at play that just will not let him do so willingly - the internal dynamics within a family and unwritten laws that govern a society. Firstly he, as a father, has responsibility towards his

children as he needs to provide them with necessities. Then he assumes the role of an educator, a role model. He tries to impose his own views on them, teach them what he learnt and thus ensure continuing of the family line and preparedness of its members for the real life. What he fails to see is the contradiction between what he regards useful and viable and what is useful and really working. His stubborn allegiance to the popular myth of rewarded hard work clashes with actual reality and the changed conditions in society. The contending views create a schism in the family, especially in the relationship with Biff. Both Willy and Biff are trapped in the complicated net of social relationships and familial ties. As a father he tries to impose his views even though he knows he has not lived up to the expectations of his professed beliefs but he considers the directions correct as it prescribes the myth of the American Dream. Willy fully engages in the capitalistic doctrine of success as he trusts in that proclaimed value; that success comes to those who are working hard. Thus reaching success proves a person worthy; worthy in the eyes of society and thus fulfilling one of the articles of the invisible covenant with society and so reaching satisfaction, even happiness. And Pursuit of Happiness is one of the doctrine's cornerstone. The combination of Puritanical values and modern optimism in a world, which is believed to be without limits, seems to be fatal to Willy.

His persistence arises not only from the fear of being rejected by the success oriented society; but more importantly he feels enormous responsibility toward his sons. How can he acknowledge his failure if by doing so he would be forced to admit the failure in the process of upbringing of his sons by invalidating the beliefs he proclaims essential? How could he remain a role model, 'the boss', an object of admiration if he were a failure? In his society to win is not an option, it is a must. How could he be a proper member of a society if he failed to live up to its standards? He can neither ignore the pressures around him and responds to them by sustaining his dream, nor can he acknowledge his moral bankruptcy because he needs to maintain his personal integrity and dignity. Thus entrapped by his pride he thinks he has to continue in what he has been doing so far to avoid any, in his mind, disastrous consequences. Thus hoping for a sudden windfall he goes on, because in his mind there is no turning back, since it would be considered an act of betrayal of his beliefs he has been serving to up to now. He needs to succeed, if nothing more than, at least, in the process maintaining his current status quo.

Biff, on the other hand, if fully aware of his father's predicament and is not so naive as to engage fully in the beliefs of Willy. He is, as well, torn apart by the familial ties; his place is to accept what is offered and to be enlightened, should he remain respectful to his father.

Biff's love for Willy hinders his natural progress as he, out of respect and pity, succumbs to father's expectations and foolish dreams. However, in the course of time the discontent and frustration fed by his forced dependency surfaces and Biff must, inevitably, stand up against Willy's ideals. The contradicting forces of making one to conform to societal claims masked as father's claims - the legacy of his dreams – violently clash with the natural dissent of an offspring in search of independency and his own identity. Thus, these two men are pulled together and torn apart at the same time, giving priority to what is momentarily necessary.

Both are fighters that are to protect their own ground. There are many things they have in common but there are many on which they differ. In order to maintain their identity they have to fight each other – Willy cannot stop to be a salesman because he would admit his failure. Salesman is all he is, it is his identity, this is how people know him and recognize him, at least in his eyes. He is a self-made man carrying on the banner of his ancestors self-sufficiency, people, who were able to make things work, the line of predecessors he cannot betray by announcing his withdrawal. Willy is tradition-bound in the sense of being on his own. It is why he cannot accept the job Charley offers in hope of overcoming Willy's predicament of not being able to pay insurance and the humiliation of asking his neighbor for a loan.

> CHARLEY […] Now listen Willy, I know you don't like me and nobody can say I'm in love with you, but I'll give you a job because – just for the hell of it, put it that way.
> Now, what do you say?
> WILLY I – I just can't work for you, Charley.
> CHARLEY What're you, jealous of me?
> WILLY I can't work for you, that's all, don't ask me why. (2135)

Willy tenaciously adheres to his assumed identity and claims to be proud of his alleged achievements for the reasons described above. In the same way, out of different reasons, Biff has to insist on his version of a dream, his version of life and thus different identity. In time he refuses the identity that has never fitted him, that of a salesman, as Willy would like him to be, which mould Biff once tried to fit.

Biff serves as an alter ego of Willy; at first in accord with father's aspirations but gradually falling behind when he realizes what kind of a twisted dream Willy has had. Biff could never aspire to the heights his father had set for him. He was good at sport, fine at school, but the pivotal moment came in the Boston hotel where Biff lost all his illusions about Willy. Willy's inexcusable affair had a pernicious effect on Biff: he felt betrayed; accused Willy of betrayal of whole family and by the same token of the ideals he tried to teach his sons. Since then, Biff travels on a downward spiral, flunks out and tries his hand in different jobs away from his family. This only accelerates Biff's opposing feelings because he sees, as much as painful it is, his father as he really is. Willy is trapped again as he is not able to explain what happened

in the hotel room because he would have to disclose the truth that lingers under his feigned optimism and pep talk.

Analogous tensions appear in both plays due to generational differences and particular world view that imply dissimilar values. The parents' effort is understood in the framework of the society that dictates certain values. It could be also seen as a part of leaving an imprint in the world, as an act of assertion of own worth. Willy fantasies about his popularity and worth in the public eyes and daydreams that his funeral will be attended by a great number of people, as his role model salesman was. As Bigsby contends "what Willy Loman finally seeks is not success but *immortality*. He wishes to pass something more than an inheritance to his sons. He wants to live in and through them, which is why he offers a death with such equanimity." [17] The irony is the funeral is an affirmation of the opposite.

Amanda is a woman who also wants to pass something of hers on her children to provide them with basic tools for life and securing her own continuation through her children. It also points to the inescapability of the influence of society's values. She is, for one, trapped in a changing world and so is she a product partially of herself and partially of her environment. She, too, belongs to a world that is slowly ceasing to exists, world that used to have relevance for her and her ancestors, without diminished relevance of the frontier spirit, ruggedness, self-reliance, determinism, tenacity. She is, as Willy, 'selling' herself – the smile, unrelenting energy, boundless hope and encouraging, dotting optimism banded with persistence and determination to achieve the dream – these are the articles they carry around in their figurative valises. The pressing claims of a society are directed through them to influence their posterity so the laws of society can be sustained, which is in direct contradiction to the familial ties and the import of individualism. She, too, is a fighter; unable, unwilling to give up in order to retain her dignity as a parent and as a worthy citizen. There is also the lingering sense of betrayal, not on a personal level as in *Salesman* but of much deeper one; the betrayal of the Dream that failed both of them, causing dissatisfaction and consequent departure of Amanda's husband and later of her son, Tom, too.

Both Williams and Miller were concerned with the state of their society. Williams "explored the plight of the self in recoil from the public world [whereas] Miller opted for a drama which staged the individual's struggle to negotiate personal meaning in social context."[18] Both have the common denominator: the world in transformation, changing

[17] Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 119.
[18] Christopher Bigsby and Don.B. Wilmeth, eds. "Introduction" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II: 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 8.

values, deepening differences; the world that exerts great pressure on individuals and the family. It is a world that is shrinking and limiting, where the family slowly disintegrates under the pressure and out of anxiety. A place, where the old ideals connected to family are challenged, illusions de-masked, old myths deconstructed in favor of new ones.

Death of a Salesman is a play examining the dynamics of wrong dreams and illusions that are held by an individual that is in their embrace and in a grip of the society, its ideals and tacit laws. *The Glass Menagerie* deals with illusions and social pressure, too. As many modern American plays, they scrutinize the power of illusions. Illusions are ubiquitous and substantially influence the characters' perception. By distrusting illusions the search for the real, reality, the truth is implied. Illusions, deception and searching for the nature of the real are at core of all canonical post war theatrical works. In *Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche is unwilling to give up the old romantic illusions to be replaced with a cruel and mundane reality. In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* it is the crumbling of the image of illusionary child that points to the personal fallacies and failures. His other play, *The American Dream,* is the popular version of the superficiality of the notion the Dream offers. Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West* are ironical attacks on the American values connected to the myth of the frontier, progress and family. In this case the family suffers further disintegration and it suggests the interconnection between failure in the family and that on a larger scale. David Mamet hardly presents a complete family – he deals with quasi families that substitute the nuclear family and replaces it with interest groups. The relationships inside these groups are compromised by the corrupting and merciless effects of individualism and greed. Leaping far ahead and skipping number of playwrights, Tony Kushner in *Angels in America* deconstructs the traditional functions and notion of what a family means and disrupts the traditional gender functions. It also suggests certain development of the portrayal of the unit questioning its validity.

2.2 Edward Albee

Edward Albee has been a controversial playwright ever since his initial play. *The Zoo Story* was first staged outside the United States in Germany and only from there his reputation as a new promising writer travelled back to his homeland. His next one-act play, *The American Dream* was received hesitantly for its ambiguity stemming from its unusual originality and sarcastic edge. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, his first full-length play, sparked off violent criticism and denigration of his qualities as a playwright. The attacks ranged from aloof dismissals to violent attacks pointing to alleged moral threat and degradation the play represented. Richard Schechner assessed *Virginia Woolf* as a play of

> […] dirty jokes […] self pity, drooling, womb-seeking weakness […] morbidity, plotless naturalism, misrepresentation of history, American society, philosophy and psychology [He is] tired of morbidity and sexual perversity which are only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre and audience. I am tired of play-long "metaphors"- such as the illusionary child – which is neither philosophically, psychologically, nor poetically valid. I'm tired of Albee. [1]

Later in his essay he sardonically admits that the playwright cannot be ignored for his originality because "there is no way in which we can ignore danger or disease [and that] it is not right to welcome the plague into our midst [which] is likely to have an infective and corrosive influence on our theatre."[2]Similarly Philip Roth criticized the same play in an essay entitled "The Play That Dare Not Speak Its Name" where he claims that

> the disaster of the play – its tediousness, its pretentiousness, its galling sophistication, its gratuitous and easy symbolizing, its ghastly pansy rhetoric and repartee – can be traced to own unwillingness or inability to put its real subject at the centre of the action.[3]

Albee shares with his predecessors, Williams and Miller, thematically, as well as differs from them in many respects. The prevalence of loss that is so pronounced with Williams and Miller is also present in Albee's works. This is a sort of loss that emerges in characters' desolation and spiritual exhaustion. It is inextricably linked to creation of personal fiction or illusion, which reign characters' personal life. The other theme he shares, that is inherent especially with Williams, is theatricality. It amounts nearly to a play-within-a-play as characters act for their own audience. Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* hardly ever slips out of her role that sustains of encouragement and positivism. Blanche of *Streetcar Named Desire* acts out the idealized version of the southern belle. Martha and George in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* both entertain and deter their audience. Theatricality is inevitably

---

[1] Richard Schrechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays,* C.W.E Bigsby ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975) 63-64.
[2] Schrechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" 64-65.
[3] Schrechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" 65.

tied to the use of language. Linguistic excess, as a self-defining vehicle, is evident chiefly in Miller's Willy Loman whose verbosity creates his own imagined identity. Albee is a master in employing language of ironic, caustic, fierce and penetrating quality, which amounts to, as Bigsby describes, "the substitution of language for experience".[4] Early Albee also differs from the above playwrights stylistically in writing plot less plays which defy categorization.

Since the beginning of his career critics tried to classify Albee's writing with mixed results. As he claims he "doesn't like labels"[5] and himself tries to avoid to be pigeonholed. He is evasive if asked about the nature and intention of a particular play and prefers each viewer or reader to discover for themselves. Albee is a strong advocate of the importance of art in personal life. Not only in drama alone does he see the "triumph of the middlebrow"[6] and praises the redemptive powers that art should contain and represent, but also in art in general. His idea of the function of art is that of unsettling disturbance, of waking up. He claims that "all art that is any good is holding a mirror up to people, saying 'this is who you are, this is how you behave. If you don't like it, why don't you change?'"[7] The art should not cater to the majority's taste but provoke because its function is "to protest the *status quo* – to try to change people, to try to bring them into a greater alertness of themselves, make them more alive, more self-aware." [8]

Albee thus has never settled on one style of writing or attempted to repeat his previous success by imitating himself; has always been experimenting with form and content. *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* puzzled critics and audience by its peculiarity and were characterized as absurd plays. Even though Albee admits to have been influenced by number of playwrights like Beckett and Ionesco, he declines his first plays being absurd. He claims that the attitude of "I go to theater to relax and have a good time" that encourages an escapist entertainment is, on the contrary, absurd. The tendency of staging 'light' pieces, Albee asserts,

> is in conflict with the purpose of the theater of the Absurd - which is to make a man face up to human condition as it really is. […] I would submit that the Theater of the Absurd, in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theater, facing as it does man's condition as it is, is the Realistic theater of our time; and that the supposed Realistic theater - the terms used here to mean most what is done on Broadway - in the sense that it panders to the public need for self-congratulation and reassurance and presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves is, with an occasional very lovely exception, really truly the Theater of the Absurd. [9]

---

[4] Schrechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee" 66.
[5] Edward Albee, *Stretching My Mind* (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2006) 89.
[6] Albee, *Stretching* 55.
[7] C.W.E.Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Volume Two: Williams/Miller/Albee* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 133.
[8] Albee, *Stretching* 82.
[9] Albee, *Stretching* 10.

Albee has been very critical of the Broadway production and the artificial and misleading distinction of a 'good' and 'bad' play. The quality of a play is observed according to the amount of money it generates which results in the tendency to stage works that entertain and are not offensive. The situation is strikingly similar to the nineteenth century vogue for melodrama that, as well, accommodated to popular taste and presented an assurance of the validity of the current values. Albee attempts the opposite. He wants to wake up the sleeping consciousness and if necessary, to offend. This has been a cause of numerous controversies and misunderstandings of his objectives. As Christopher Bigsby observes the misunderstanding of Albee's "absurd plays" is due to the fact that "the absurd [is] in radical conflict with basic American myths having to do with the integral self and the inevitability of progress." [10]

Albee is a close kin to European playwrights, as Martin Esslin claims about the Theater of the Absurd. He shares some of the sensibilities and also transforms them into American realities creating peculiar blend of both features. Bigsby compares Albee to Beckett. He claims they share similar sensibilities concerning the consciousness, Beckett's notion of 'the old ego' that dies hard, the unawareness and the necessity of waking up to be alive, the importance of "being shocked into reality."[11] Both playwrights suggest the necessity of getting out of the set ways and look at life afresh, leaving behind all redundant habits that prevent them from being alive – all this at a painful cost of discarding the old and accepting the excruciating new. Mathew C. Roundané affirms such a view and describes Albee's characters as vegetating in "death-in-life state."[12] Roundané links Albee with existentionalism and its chief precept: the person's need to realize the painful reality and shake off the petrifying complacent life based on personal fiction which is a distraction from living to the full potential.

Albee's *The American Dream* falls into category of an absurd play, even though it mixes the absurd with the real. What does the absurd mean, then? How can it be summarized? Martin Esslin offers a general characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd:

> […] it expresses a sense of shock at the absence, the loss of any clear and well-defined systems of beliefs or values […] the waning of religious faith that had started with Enlightenment and led Nietzsche to speak of the 'death of God; the breakdown of the liberal faith in inevitable social progress in the wake of the First World War; the disillusionment with the hopes of radical social revolution as predicted by Marx […] the relapse into barbarism, mass murder, and genocide in the course of Hitler's

[10] Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 125.
[11] Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* 134.
[12] Mathew C. Roundané, *Understanding Edward Albee* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987) 29.

> brief rule; and in the aftermath the spread of spiritual emptiness in the outwardly prosperous and affluent societies of Western Europe and the United States […] previously hold certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical – in a word, absurd. [13]

In case of *The Dream*, thanks to his way of using language, Albee has been compared to Ionesco, whose clichés, sentences empty of any communicative quality, are juxtaposed in such a way that the result seems quite funny and absurd. Albee's clichés are typical American, taken from real life and thus seemingly more realistic, although the result is similarly funny and alarming. The prime example of his mastery is shown in *The Dream*, the vacuous discussions of Mommy and Daddy. Albee's similar to other absurd playwrights in the choice of a subject matter - emptiness, pointlessness of life, absurd existence; all this only to a certain extent. When Esslin compares the chief envoys of the absurd he points out the role of *reality* in Albee's work - the commingling of the absurd and realism. Bisby perceives Albee as different from the above writers in some respects. He asserts that

> Albee still believes in the validity of reason – that things can be proved, or that events can be shown to have definite meanings – and unlike Beckett and the others, is scarcely touched by the sense of living in an absurd universe.[14]

Albee hints at possibility of transformation, spiritual redemption and renewal of the self. It is never realized on stage but only suggested.

2.2.1 Power of Illusions – *The American Dream*

The American Dream is an overt attack on the principal American values. The title itself suggests the main one under scrutiny. The Dream is framed into an American family that has lost many of its vital functions. The loss is expressed in sterility of the members both in physical and psychological respect. It exposes the break of communication, loss of virility, decline of feelings. The play presents an American family – Mommy, Daddy, Grandma – in search for replacement for the adopted child that "went wrong" and died. The missing member of the family arrives in a shape of gorgeous young man,

> the embodiment of the American dream, all-American ideal who admits that he consists only of muscles and a healthy exterior, but is dead inside, drained of genuine feeling and the capacity of experience. He will do anything for money [and] later becomes the part of the family. [15]

[13] Martin Esslin, *Absurd Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967) 13.
[14] C.W.E Bigsby ed. "Introduction" in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975) 63-64.
[15] Bigsby, *Critical Essays* 24.

The American Dream is generally considered a savage attack on the American way of life, on the pattern to which many Americans tend to conform. On television, in advertising, and elsewhere the way in which Americans are assumed and expected to live, is shown.

> The American way of life has become a political slogan and a commercial interest since the war and is maintained and manipulated through image-building mainly by mass-media. Those images, through commercial and political exploitation, have lost their meaning. This is why the technique of the theatre of the absurd, which is itself preoccupied with the devaluation of language and of images, and with the deceptive nature of the appearance, are so ideally suited to the kind of social criticism of Albee[16]

Loss of meaning, language devaluation, spiritual emptiness – these are the features of *The American Dream*. Mommy and Daddy converse in a meaningless intercourse using musty clichés; far from eloquent in their polite, sweet exchanges, while using euphemisms reminiscing of political correctness. Such a talk does not progress much, does not aim at anything and the basic function of conveying information is missing. How much is said is in sharp contrast with how much information is passed on. It seems as if they were talking in a circle – nothing resolved, little understood, no action taken – all matters can come back quite soon and be talked about all over again. Verbosity replaces action as well as constitutes a meaning by filling the emptiness with words.

Then Mrs. Barker, an agent of the Adoption Service, arrives; the first and only character with a name which might represent a flicker of hope of breaking out of the vicious circle. Sadly, she falls in line with Mommy and Daddy in terms of cliché-like utterances:

> Daddy: Uh…Mrs. Barker, is it? Won't you sit down?
> Mrs.Barker: I don't mind if I do.
> Mommy: Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs?
> Mrs. Barker: You forget yourself, Mommy; I'm a professional woman. But I will cross my legs.
> Daddy: Yes, make yourself comfortable.
> Mrs.Barker: I don't mind if I do. [17]

The emptiness of characters' lives is revealed through their language. There is also the muddle and dispassionate way of speaking about matters rather serious which point to their inner wasteland. Mrs. Barker came to visit Mommy and Daddy but cannot remember why. Grandma has to come to rescue with her 'hints' of the visitor's purpose; a hint – the story of a "man very much like Daddy, and a woman very much like Mommy":

> There was a sweet lady very much like you.[…] very much like a volunteer for an organization very much like the Bye-Bye Adoption Service […]
> The woman who was very much like Mommy, said that she and the man very much like the Daddy had never been blessed with anything very much like the bumble of joy […] bumble, bundle, who cares […]she said that they wanted a bumble of their own, but that the man, who was very much like Daddy, couldn't have a bumble; and the man, who was very much like Daddy, said that yes, they wanted a bumble of their own, but that the woman, who was very much like Mommy, couldn't have one and that now they wanted to buy something very much like a bumble. (98)

[16] Bigsby, *Critical Essays* 27.
[17] Edward Albee, *The American Dream* (New York: Signet Book, 1961) 77.

This is a criticism of the vacuous talk. Speaking this way is absurd and funny enough to point out the inner emptiness reflected in outer incapacity to remember. There are also hints about sterility of their lives and actions. On the top of intellectual and moral sterility, Mommy and Daddy are unable to produce a child, which is pointing to their barrenness. Beside the individual sterility the collective sterility is present as well - it eliminates natural impulses in others. Mommy and Daddy buy "a bumble of joy" and its upbringing is a series of mutilations:

> Grandma: …then, it began develop an interest in its you-know-what.
> Mrs.Baker: In its you-know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hands off at the wrists!
> Grandma: Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first, they cut off its you-know-what.
> Mrs.Baker: A much better idea!
> Grandma: That's what they thought. But after they cut off its you-know-what, it still put its hands under the covers, looking for its you-know-what. So, finally, they had to cut off its hands at the wrists.
> Mrs.Barker: Naturally!
> Grandma: And it was such a resentful bumble. Why, one day it called its Mommy a dirty name.
> Mrs.Barker: Well, I hope they cut its tongue out!
> Grandma: Of course. And then, as it got bigger, they found out all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay…just dreadful things.(100-101)

The parents are unable to deal with the reality that the child forces them to compromise their complacency as it does things that are common but undesirable in the eyes of the parents. The child's eyes are poked out, it is castrated, its hands are cut off, the tongue is cut out, and it finally dies. The child just went wrong. All the capacities for connection are destroyed and the child dies as a result of the "proper care" by the parents and of the socializing process of the American way of life. The child is also reduced to mere thing, a commodity that is easily obtainable and as easily disposable. This part is the chief example of the absurd aspect because it uses the hyperbolic description of the infanticide. The implication cannot be nothing but symbolic because such a situations prevents the realistic reading.

Towards the end of the play, a "twin" of "the bumble of joy" appears. It is a young man with all the external marks of youth and vitality, handsome, muscular, and self-confident. Grandma recognizes him immediately as the American Dream: "Clean-cut, Midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile…"(107) But similarly as the fake parental love towards the child, the youthful appearance of the embodiment of the American Dream is just a shell. He is empty inside.

> ….in the years that have passed, I have suffered losses…that I can't explain. A fall from grace….a departure of innocence…loss…loss…my heart became numb….I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have no emotions. I have , now, only my person…my body, my face. I use what I have…I

> let people love me…I except the syntax around me, for while I cannot relate…I know I must be related to….(114)

The play ends with the Young man remaining with the family. Grandma is leaving them but coming in the front stage she keeps watching; the family accepting the illusion of the American Dream and Grandma commenting:

> Well, I guess that just about wraps it up. I mean, for better or worse, this is a comedy, and I don't think we'd better go any further. No, definitely not. So, let's leave things as they are right now…while everybody's happy…while everybody's got what he wants…or everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears.(127)

The play is a social critique of the docile characters willingly accepting the status quo. Daddy claims in the very beginning: "That's the way things are today, and there's nothing you can do about it"(57). *The Dream* is an example of such an account when all sorts of deplorable behavior is pilloried. The family is portrayed as complete but absolutely dysfunctional. It is a parody of a family. The functions are only superficial, with no substance detectable. Albee's family suggests an ironical treatment of the supposed functional and exemplary American family that represents all the virtues it is supposed to. The picture is critical of the insularity of the ideal, undermines the advertised desirability of a perfect unit and shows the superficiality by revealing the ostentatious façade. The only capable person in the family seems to be Grandma. When she meets the Young man, obviously the embodiment of the American Dream, she refuses to play the game and is leaving to watch others from the forestage. Meeting of these two 'Dreams' is usually interpreted as the encounter of two different kinds of the American Dream. Grandma is the only significant person with genuine vitality and attractiveness – she is "rural" that is from the older way of life and the Young Dream is just a hollow shell.

Ervin Beck claims Grandma the central figure of the play; she is praised for her "realism, clear vision, enjoyment of living, and creative response to life."[18] Grandma is the only genuinely human, emphatic character in the play. It might be a reflection of Albee's childhood as well as pointing to larger issues in the society. In Albee's personal life his grandmother for him

> represented another time and another set of values remote from that of family who wintered in Florida and Arizona and traveled around in Rolls Royces. He associated her with an America unspoiled by wealth and with values derived from an authentic American Myth of frontier individualism and liberal commitment. [19]

[18] Ervin Beck "Allegory in Edward Albee's The American Dream" Goshen College, Faculty Publication, 1996. 21 December 2006 <http://www.goshen.edu/facultypubs/DREAM.html>

[19] Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* 250.

Grandma recognizes the young man as the American Dream only because she represents the old style American Dream. "The Young Man has been explicated as a Hollywood-style American Dream of Success – sexy, materialistic, lacking values, superficially dazzling." [20] The juxtaposition here is striking: the Young Man with the marvelous physique but incomplete and Grandma of a substance but of a decrepit body. Grandma is thus the real Dream, aged, now almost forgotten and replaced by the mutilated, impotent, nevertheless attractive New Dream. Replaced by shallowness, laziness and complacency the old one has been forgotten. The old version of the Dream perhaps Willy Loman pined for; easily attainable, clearly defined, morally valid and stable.

2.2.2 Loss – *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Albee's plays suggest the search for the underlying truth that is covered by sediments of myths, illusion and complacency. In his search he is a kin to Thoreau, who explored the life stripped of all unnecessary paraphernalia in favor of simplicity, clarity and authenticity:

> Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality. [21]

Albee, also, tries to get below the surface, under the pretention, the treacherous realism, down to the rock bottom, to peel labels and head towards the marrow. It is in his next play where he shows his mastery. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the profound probe sounds the depths of illusions, of O'Neill's "pipe-dreams" or Ibsen's "life-lies". The viciousness of dialogues, the acerbic language, numerous sexual innuendoes and the final exorcism of the false beliefs were, at that time, shocking for audience and some critics. They, nevertheless, brought Albee fame but also denunciation. This is a burden Albee willingly agrees to carry because his chief aspiration has been to shake up the complacent self, to wake up the sleeping consciousness. He is interested

> in changing the way people look at themselves and the way they look at life. […] The knowledge that you are going to die should present an intense awareness of life. People should be aware of all things at all times, they should experience the extremities of life, fulfill themselves completely. Why does anyone want to go to sleep when the only thing left is to stay awake? [22]

[20] Beck "Allegory in Edward Albee's The American Dream"
[21] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Ware: Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1995) 68.
[22] Guy Flatley, "Edward Albee Fights Back," *New York Times* 18 April 1971, 12 June 2003.

Martha and George live on a university campus and their life has been constant bickering and verbal attacks. They have developed their rituals; habitual confrontations when the abilities to attack and strike back, to pose a challenge and respond in an original way are measured up against each other. For them it is mere game to cover the facts they both are afraid to face. It is also a serious power struggle. Both are improving in their game that consists mainly of verbal attacks and retaliation that are both meant to amuse and to cut to the quick. This virtual battleground has been around for a long time and Martha and George has created certain consistency in their interaction as well as they encoded rules and boundaries that are forbidden to trespass. The culmination comes one early morning after attending rather boring campus party. Their guests, Nick and Honey, a young couple of an ambitious newly arrived teacher and his oversensitive wife, are unwilling participators and unknowing accelerators of the whole process that later follows. Serving as a backdrop for George and Martha's theatrical performance they provide an audience that is unwillingly incorporated into the 'games'. The play's three-act structure suggests the progression from "Fun and Games", when everybody is mock-tested and drawn into participation, to Act Two, "Walpurgisnacht", where the hidden powers are fully released. It finishes with "The Exorcism"; the purging and expelling the comforting demons, their illusions.

Throughout the play the all-permeating sense of loss is present. It is a state, as George utters under the breath, of "dashed hopes and good intentions." [23] There is something that defies to be identified but results in the feeling of futility and angry desperation. Martha attempts to describe it as follows:

> You know what's happened, George… you want to know what's *really happened? (Snaps her fingers)*….it snapped, finally. Not me …*it*. The whole arrangement […] You make all sorts of excuses to yourself […] but then, one day, one night, something happens …and SNAP!…it breaks. And you just don't give a damn any more… (157)

The sentiment also stems from the unfulfilled expectations of George and Martha. She expected him to be the go-getter as the doctrine of the American Dream prescribes. But George is a disappointment to her because he did not satisfy her expectations; neither did he measure up to Martha's intentions. She quickly summarizes their life up to now and presents the painful issues that spark up the fights.

> So anyway, I married the S.O.B., and I had it all planned out…first he'd take over the History Department… then when Daddy'd retired he would take over the whole College, you know…that was the way it was supposed to be […] but Georgie-boy didn't have that stuff in him […] you see, George didn't have much push…he wasn't particularly aggressive …in fact he was sort of a *flop*…a grey, big, fat *flop*!(84)

[23] Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: A Signet Book, 1962) 32.

The fact that George "is *not* the History Department, but is only *in* the History Department" (50) has greatly troubled her. The chief cause of this dissatisfaction seems to be her relationship with her father, the president of the College. She looks up to him because her

> Mommy died early, and [she] sort of grew up with Daddy. […] Jesus I admired that guy! I worshipped him…I absolutely worshipped him. I still do. […] And Daddy built this college…I mean, he built it up from what it was…it's his whole life. He *is* the college." (77)

Martha still holds her childish admiration for her able father, a man who has built something of importance, who achieved a lot and who still remains a role model and constant reminder of how a real man should behave. The celebrated male aggressiveness is obvious from the episode when Daddy challenges George into a boxing match. George is humiliated and he loses not only the match but also the admiration Martha seeks in him. It is the value apt for the masculine behavior man should possess. Martha seems to compensate for this in a sort of reversed masculinity: "I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to", (157) thus stresses George's supposed lack of it. He, then, dwindles in importance in Daddy's and Martha's eyes. Daddy is portrayed here as 'a strong man', embodiment of fitness and manly behavior; the model of masculinity. He symbolizes the figure of patriarch. Strong-willed and resolute he is all but hated by George for his condescending attitude and imperial tendencies as he "expects loyalty and devotion out of his…staff. I was going to use another word. Martha's father expects his…staff…to cling to the walls of his place, like the ivy…to come here and grow old…to fall in line of service"(41) George thus describes the president's subordinates as near-slaves characters who are chocking, trapped and ask for bringing sacrifices in his self-professed kingdom. George himself feels trapped.

The entrapment in dysfunctional marriage is felt by both Martha and George. "Dashed hopes and good intentions" are mirrored in the implied failures, professional and matrimonial, together with lack of virility on both sides. The marriage dysfunction and childlessness, the ensuing emptiness have gradually been filled by fabricating illusions. Unable to face the reality they have constructed a net of illusions that are, accelerated by alcohol, helping them to get through just another day. The theme of sterility, moral, physical and linguistic that is pertinent to characters in *The American Dream*, is repeated here with one exception. That is the use of language. Even though Martha and George's language is merely a padding to fight the void, it has also dynamic qualities because it manages to move them towards the inevitable point where they are forced to face the real. Bigsby claims that both "fill the air

with sound because without it they would have to confront one another without protection; they play their characters because performance has replaced being." [24]

Their contesting narratives are in fact avoidance of the real communication; they challenge each other and keep playing games instead of embarking on genuine talk. They have created an illusionary child as a means to alleviate the painful existence, as a connecting element of their broken relationship, as a medium of persistence in their self-delusion. This link is suddenly and brutally broken by George who declares their boy dead. He has abrogated their life-long rule of dependence on illusion. Unlike the eloquent verbiage throughout the play, at the end they talk in very short exchanges consisting of yes, no and maybe. What they are left now with is only each other and the reality. There is no more big talk that would amuse and pamper them. There is only the flesh and blood of them, the point they have reached the marrow of their illusion and relationship. Now they are faced with each other and their bare, unlabelled life free of fictionalizing discourse.

Albee's ending can still be read both ways. It could be step into a future without false illusions or persistence in the old mode of fooling themselves. Albee himself comments accordingly.

> Are George and Martha going to make it, having leveled the entire structure of their relationship? It's rubble, clear ground. […]Your guess is as good as mine. I think they have about fifty-fifty chance of making it-or maybe they won't. [25]

The key theme of the play is the reconciliation of illusions with reality within the unit of the family. Both George and Martha have almost forgotten the fine line between the two concepts. "Truth and illusion, who knows the difference?"[26] Similar to Willy Loman, the characters are defining themselves in the course of their utterances. The way they talk and the content of the exchanges point to creating their personality, their identity through their speech. They must keep on playing their games. They are so much immersed in playing them and fooling each other that the sanity has became to be replaced by irrationality. The illusion forces them to go on acting; for themselves as well as for their audience. The morning the audience arrive, George and Martha can put on the best performance ever. They become actors in their own piece that has been created and perfected over the years. There are even metatheatrical references to other plays: "Flores, flores para muertos" . This not only echoes the metaphorical death that awaits Blanche, it also foreshadows the virtual death of Martha's

[24] Bigsby, *Modern Drama* 132.
[25] Albee, *Stretching* 97.
[26] Albee, *Woolf* 66.

child. This feeling is strengthen by George reciting the Latin Mass. One line of the translation is following: “Absolve, O Lord, the souls of all the faithful departed from every bond of sin”. The incantation overlaps with Martha’s spiel about their son and creates almost unbearable rhythm that culminates in the scene of the child’s death. The whole play has an enchanting rhythm of constant verbal battles of George and Martha where each is getting an equal share of their opportunity to retort. The musicality is also reinforced by the inventive alliteration of George’s games – Get the Guest, Humiliate the Host, Hump the Hostess, Bringing up Baby.

The family is here in the center of their battles, discontent and illusions. The unit represents the dysfunctional union, affected by personal expectations. Both protagonists are entrapped in their own myth-making as well in the myths of the wider society. The idol of success broadly recognized by the society affects the couple considerably. Not attaining such ideals equals to failure. But it works the other way as well. These ideals, accepted and revered, put strain on individuals, forcing them to conform to one ideal, one way of life, and straying from that suggests not to be accepted in the big family (be it the community, society, or nation). Not to conform hence means to be ostracized. These ideals impose certain pattern of behavior and thus imply the prefabricated identity where the individuality is subjugated to the collective philosophy. The narrowing possibilities and options create narrow and limited personalities, focusing only to material success. The stress is translated onto individuals, creating anxiety and fear of failure, consequently influencing the nuclear family and its members.

The dead child in *The American Dream* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is a powerful pointer; it might represent the dead future, the severed continuity. The failure of the microcosm inside the family thus implies the wider failure, the metaphorical failure of the wider macrocosm. The inadequate requirements from society’s laws are transformed into inadequate responses on the family level. Thus we see again the attempt to escape – physically or mentally. If Mommy and Daddy escape by willing succumbing to the forces, Martha and George escape into their own myths.

Albee offers a solution that is painful but, as he deems, necessary. What he implies in his plays is the notion of transformation. In his play *Seascape* Albee suggests the following: “Mutate or perish. Let your tail drop, change your spots, or maybe just your point of view”.The necessity to accommodate and more importantly to transform is one of the key aspects of Albee’s plays. Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream* are perhaps beyond the point. Peter in *The Zoo Story* may use the ‘gift’ or Jerry’s sacrifice. George and Martha are

also on the verge of transformation. They have a chance to bring up a new child that will reflect their true selves.

Albee appears to think in possibility of transformation and becoming fully developed human beings. That is why he uses the absurd to prompt the action not to state the resigned stasis, as the proponent of the Theatre of the Absurd would do. Bigsby draws the comparison based on the different perception of a single building standing, in a photograph of a devastated city: "where the absurdist would tend to see the single building as an ironic commentary on the area of devastation, Albee, like Brecht, [is] apt to see it as a nucleus for a new city." [27] Further Bigsby attempts to show yet another face of the difference: "For Albee, absurdity is a willful product of a failure of courage and imagination. It is consequence not of metaphysical determinism but of the systematic denial of those human qualities which constitute a possible defense against the facts of entropy and death." [28]

[27] Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction Volume Two* 260.
[28] Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction Volume Two* 294.

2.3 Sam Shepard

The next writer is similar to Albee in using similar themes concerning the symbolism of a child and of transformation. His families are likewise violent and destructive environment that does not offer protection and refuge. He shares the feelings of loss, entrapment, detrimental effects of the American Dream doctrine and spiritual aridity with the playwrights discussed above. His plays do not emanate much optimism in comparison to Edward Albee's. His are rather bleak nightmares with occasional flashes of hope that is later stifled by irrationality and imminent aggression of the characters. His plays could bear the following epithets: visceral, menacing, insane, irrational, mythical, violent, passionate, apocalyptic. His characters are subjected to some unseen forces that do not let them step out from the circularity they are caught in. The hopes and good intentions are turned into meaningless strife, overcome by violence and pointlessness. He does not, however, lack poetical qualities. As Albee was called "poet of loss" by Anita Maria Stenz, Sam Shepard could receive the soubriquet "poet of the apocalypse".

Shepard is similar to early Albee but quite distant from Williams' and Miller's theater that rests on psychology and social causality. He does not engage in the absurd portrayal of characters like Albee; his are peculiar in slipping into different representations throughout the play – there is certain instability in the character, in the identity and often an abrupt change occurs, transforming character into another one; often the one shunned from. The language of characters is similarly lacking its primary function and becomes meaningless. As in Albee, it serves to fill the void. It often turns into violent attack that becomes a vehicle for dominance. Shepard is interested in moods and feelings, in the subliminal rather than the rational. Bigsby describes him as

> an intuitive writer. His plays are inspired by, and elaborated on, animating images. These images begin beyond words but words prove the primary refracting device through which they can be perceived. The world he dramatizes is protean; it changes its shape. It is typified by a dynamism or perhaps entropy that he sets himself to capture. [1]

Shepard's characters are mostly jobless and drifting. They are violent or have latent violent tendencies. Their behavior is unpredictable and the emotions mostly prevail over the rational. They are in constant search of something that is missing from their lives. The relationship of Shepard's characters is problematic - fathers do not try to keep their families together, they

[1] C.W.E.Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama Volume 3: Beyond Broadway* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1990) 221.

seem to have given up long ago, all characters just live in a circle of cruelties, emotionless repartees, in a kind of hellish existence that renders futility. They either vanished altogether or are present but merely physically. Their mental involvement is limited by hostility of the family or by their indifference. It stems from the separation from each other and their environment, from their obvious restlessness and failed sense of direction. Like some of the above characters they live in circularity that seems endless and pointless and the chances to get out are slim. The circle of violence breeds violence without any sense of liberation. The violence is most palpable inside the family; it disrupts the familial relationships, breaks the ties, and creates enemies from relatives. The confinement and determinism of the family is hardly possible to escape. The disaffection and rage is also stemming from the profound sense of loss. The claustrophobic lack of space, common in other playwrights, is altered here – lack is replaced by plenty. Paradoxically, the characters do not feel the effects of the loss of space; they are rather *lost* in space.

True West and *Buried Child* share the characteristics of ample space in comparison to the Lomans oppressed by the neighboring apartment buildings, The Wingfields boxed in tiny apartment and George and Martha enclosed in an oppressive middle-class environment of a College campus. These plays take place either on a farm or near-desert environment. There is plenty of room around but it is not a space, which should radiate feeling of freedom. Even though the spatial aspect of existence is important and renders into sense of unlimited opportunities, it does not work here. The endless space is limiting, menacing and mostly barren. There is no promise lying ahead. The farm in *Buried Child* has lost its intended purpose of growing food and raising animals. It is neglected and infertile and reminds rather of a desert than a life-giving lot. It reflects the inner desert, the emptiness, which is experienced by each character and is analogous to moral sterility of Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream*, where the inner wasteland thrives on superficialities without substance.

True West and *Buried Child* are Shepard's family plays, and the family is under pressure. It ceased to be a save haven and shelter against the harsh outside. In Williams and Miller's plays the key strain comes from the impossibility of reconciliation of the private and the public, mainly in terms of the tyranny of the American Dream, its treacherous promise-making. There is also abysmal difference between individualist's translation of its meaning and actual utilization. Shepard's characters seem to be much further, beyond certain point of return when they already live in a state of suspension; the dream is hollowed and there exists nothing to replace it with. It is a limbo with no way out, an environment where all efforts

wither away, hope is crushed by the harsh environment and characters move in vicious circle that is endless and endlessly repetitive.

Shepard's plays frequently feature an open land stretching beyond horizon, seemingly unlimited possibility of unrestricted space. His characters are somehow connected to this space, which is mainly some kind of desert, be it literal or metaphorical one. The open space that Biff in *Salesman* is missing and to which he resorts to at times sharply contrasts with Shepard's farms, cowboys, people living in the open. The pastoral idyll of Willy's dreams about his father's life is eroded in Shepard. For him, such a place is equally limiting and offers no definite solutions, providing no easy escape.

The feeling of a desert is shared in *Paris, Texas* that Shepard co-wrote screenplay for. Travis, the main character, is walking along railroad tracks and his brother that came to help him, asking: "you mind telling me where're you heading? What's out there? There's nothing out there…"[2] Travis, as many Shepard's characters, is rootless, coming from somewhere through desert heading as the crows fly. The lack of background is amplified by his silence, inability or unwillingness to speak as far as he is away from 'civilization'. Travis describes his own conditions as follows: "And for the first time he wished he were far away, lost in a deep vast country where nobody knew him, somewhere without language, or streets, and he dreamed about this place without knowing its name…"[3]

The image of desert is a recurring image in Shepard. It mostly reflects the bleak state of minds and thinking of his characters; they try to escape to desert to get away from people, from their social worlds they can no longer sustain, making themselves self-afflicted outcasts, living different lives far away from other people.

2.3.1 Impending Doom – *Buried Child*

In *Buried Child* the farm is spacious and the family is not oppressed by tall looming buildings of apartment houses, there is no feeling of loss of space. There is all the space at hand, the vast and empty space. They are living on a farm, in mid-America, that might represent the source of food for the whole country. But this family is dysfunctional and miserable. They are oppressed by some hidden guilt; a guilt committed in the past but effectual up to now. It presents broken trust and disrupted family ties, disintegration in the

[2] *Paris, Texas*, prod. Chris Sievernich, dir. Wim Wenders. 1984, 19 min., 42 sec.
[3] *Paris, Texas*, 2 h, 2 min, 38 sec.

midst of plenty, in a kind of American Eden – a garden formerly filled with plenty that is now barren. This kind of sterility is translated into the family ties.

Dodge, the aged, cantankerous and ineffectual patriarch of the family has lost his power and respect and stands rather ironic representation of the father figure. He shuns from all responsibilities. He is bitterly denying existence of the past and no faith in the future. Being bullied by his children and wife, he is disempowered and remains as a useless relic of the past. He refers to the outside fields saying "there is nothing out there."[4] The feeling of emptiness, vast void outside propels the dynamic of loss, of a desert. There is feeling of desolation that entered the inside of the house and infected the inhabitants. Dodge and Halie have two sons, Bradley and Tilden. The relationship with father is problematic, and with each other virtually nonexistent. It is reduced to mutual psychological or physical abuse. The bond is tainted by the hidden truth. Gradually, the family secret that was kept under wraps is surfacing – a child was killed and buried somewhere outside. It later materially surfaces as a proof of the infanticide, a probable product of an incestuous liaison of Tilden and Halie. The death has been hanging over the farm since it happened and has stifled all vital functions of the farm and the family. The elm trees are here are reminders of *Death of a Salesman* and chiefly O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*. No crop has been planted; there has been no harvest up to now. The dead baby was buried in the field and nothing good came out of it but violence and hatred; it reminds the proverbial what you sow so you shall reap.

The buried child in the play has various implications; it could refer to buried childhood, to dead future possibilities buried in the unfertile present or, perchance, some sort of guilt deep in the past of the family that is, perhaps, metonymic for the whole country. A guilt that afflicts the current generation, as a curse upon the land where nothing new grows. Tilden's own son, Vince, is coming to visit his family with his girlfriend Shelly. He himself gets entangled into the family circle of violence and power struggle. First unrecognized for being related to Dodge "I'm nobody's grandpa", (126) and later assimilated into the family by his experience. When Vince, the prodigal son, drives away and tries to leave the family, he sees the faces of his ancestors:

> I could see myself in the windshield. […]I studied my face. […] As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though frozen in time. […] And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to the faces I've never seen before but still recognized. (130)

[4] Sam Shepard, *Seven Plays: Buried Child* (New York: Dial Press, 1981) 69.

Vince comes back from the ride a changed man as if he believed the things he saw and realized that it is something he cannot escape. It is the family that he cannot run away from and he comes back and claims his stake in the family business. He changes in the manner of his grandfather and his uncles, resorting to drunkenness and violence. Eventually he claims the right to the house, to this fate, very quickly becoming embodiment of the young Dodge. He assumes Dodge's position by taking his place and covering himself with Dodge's blanket as a symbol of the ownership, of power, sort of ermine coat of an impoverished ruler as well as an instrument of protection against the threatening environment of the family. The only person who escapes is Shelly. She has saved her integrity by leaving Vince and the farm house. It seems the only way of shaking off the determinacy of the family, the contagion that strongly affects. Dodge dies in the meantime of a mundane death that is almost comical, which hardly anybody notices and the circle of inheritance, circle of violence keeps going on seemingly endlessly, infused with a new blood. The family genetics, the physical determinism is hard to escape. The circularity of loneliness, violence, estrangement, rootlessness is not broken here by the patriarch's death. The guilt has not been atoned for, the curse is sustained. In treatment of the father figure, there are some similarities to *Death of a Salesman*. Dodge is similarly ineffectual as Willy in the attempt to keep his family together. While Willy still tries to perform his role of a parent, Dodge has given up long ago. The latter is stripped of his masculinity as he is bullied by his son Bradley, in fact ignored by his wife with whom the relationship is based rather on formal level, disempowered by his inability and disinterest to act as the patriarch. Willy, on the other hand, attempts to gain the lost position of the family's leader and major provider and of an ideological captain of his 'team' but loses the battle again and again. Dodge, even though bitter and sullen, seems to have a pragmatic streak in himself when he deconstructs the American world of infinite hope and boundless optimism: "you are all alike you hopers. If it's not God than it's a man. If it's not a man then it's a woman. If it's not a woman then it's the land or future of some kind. Some kind of future."(109)

The broken bonds are obvious even in Dodge's sons. The ties are absent, the brothers are much indifferent to each other. Tilden, the older son, is lacking the mental abilities to take care about himself. He is half-witted shadow of a real man. Bradley has one limb artificial as he chopped his leg off with a chainsaw and thus does not fit the picture of the All-American. When deprived of the prosthesis he becomes helpless. They are in a sense half-men as one important aspect that would amount to greatness is missing. They are sharply contrasted with their departed brother. The late Ansel is glorified and portrayed as a heroic figure, the embodiment of the American Dream. He is considered "a genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And

very intelligent. Ansel could have been a great man. One of the greatest. I only regret that he didn't die in an action. It's not fitting for a man like that to die in a motel room." (73) Even though Ansel, in Halie's mind, fits the mold of a hero – she talks about his statue with basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other – he died of an inglorious death in a motel. It contains a touch of dark humor as the overlooked death of Dodge and his last-will speech. Even the name Ansel suggests certain angelic qualities; but again, it has a ring of parody. No one from the farm fits the American ideal. Similar to Albee's *American Dream*, the superficial, handsome, strong character that everybody likes; even here, unfortunately, it is hollow inside, as the dream itself, as the wrong dreams of Willy's, as the life of Dodge's family. A dream that is winding down and slowly vanishing. A dream that is indivisible part of the society and keeps influencing its individuals, thus the families.

2.3.2 Crisis – *True West*

True West is set in the desert town somewhere in South California, in the inhospitable place that looks as if built by chance. The desert is all around and that is the place, where father of both main characters opted to live, far away from other people. It is an escape that gives little satisfaction; both for the distant father and his sons. When he resides in an inhospitable place by the urban standards, they live in temporary housing that on surface offers comfort. But it is an illusionary comfort – both brothers are slipping into irrationality and emptiness, challenged to reconcile the dissatisfaction with each other's differing personalities. *True West* poses another difficult relationship. Their father does not participate in the family as he left for desert life, to get out of the constraints of civilization. Austin and Lee are temporarily living in their mother's house. Austin, the more conventional character is a freelance writer who contrasts with Lee, a drifter and a petty thief. Lee is similar to his father. They are akin to Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, Biff in *Death of a Salesman* and Tilden in *Buried Child* who escape the city to seek in the country, in search for meaning. They are all desperately looking for some tangible relief or try to get away from the sense of dissatisfaction. Their common denominator is *movement*, the expression of freedom and opportunities as well as of escape from difficulties. But here the certain nobility of the rugged individuals is undercut and becomes a pastiche of the westward migration in search of the Frontier. They are lost in space, outdated, as the cowboy, Jack Burns, in 1962 movie *Lonely Are the Brave.* As John M. Clum asserts, that this film is greatly reflected in *True West*. Jack

is a loner who "rides across a desert where are barbed-wire fences (which he, as real Westerner hates), jet planes rumbling and four-lane highways. […] In series of shots, jack and his horse are contrasted visually with truckloads of abandoned cars, the detritus of modern America."[5] At the end, Jack and his horse are hit by a truck on a highway – horse is shot and he is taken to hospital. The outcast that Jack is – no driver's license, no insurance, no social security, no address – gives striking resemblance to Lee and Austin and their violent dispute over the validity of the West. Both seem to be self-exiled from the normal way of life. The brothers' relationship becomes difficult as time progresses when Lee exudes hidden accusations and violence finally breaks out in the coda; two brothers holding each other in deadly grip, obvious deadlock, when neither can let go of the other. "Austin and Lee are two halves of a divided personality",[6] John Clum observes. From Austin initial "we're not insane. We're not driven to acts of violence like that. Not over a dumb movie script"[7] to the final fight that denies his previous assertion, there has been raising tension between the two. The pretense is the quarrel over the script and the debate about the meaning of the true West. But there is deeper divide between two personalities, brothers and members of the same family. The break that started with their father now continues with children.

The peculiar feature of Shepard's characters is their frequent metamorphosis. In *True West* the violence, verbal and physical attacks, the volatility of characters and unpredictability of the situation is contrasted with the stillness of the outside disturbed by coyote calls and chirping crickets. The characters are fluid and undergo a transformation. Austin and Lee swap their personalities – Lee that was previously a drifter catches attention of the agent and starts to write the required story. Austin is transformed into a petty thief and embarks on stealing toasters from the neighborhood. They change their identities as a result of the unbearable situation, as a schizophrenic attempt to escape the difficult strictures of one assumed identity.

Vince in *Buried Child* is himself transformed into the belligerent patriarch of his family, carrying on the legacy. Similarly as Wesley and Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class* change their identities, the former, son, transforms into his father incorporating the same behavior, attired in his father's clothes. Wesley becomes Weston as Vince becomes Dodge – they became infected by the curse, unable to escape the family determinism. It points also to transformation of the West, the Frontier itself, which is reinforced by the characters' names.

---

[5] John M. Clum, "The classic Western and Sam Shepard's family sagas", *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, ed. Matthew Rondané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 182.
[6] Clum, 186.
[7] Sam Shepard, "True West", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 6th ed., Nina Baum, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 2295.

As in Miller, the present is heavily influenced by the past. Shepard also shows that it is an equal part of the present, contained in the present moment and determines the present and future outcomes of person's behavior. Willy's ideals, thoughts, aspirations are modeled on his father's and mostly on the notion of his successful brother. He is infected by the vacant mythology. Shepard's families are affected differently. The Illinois farm family battles with a curse of the past that is present in the title itself, with the specter of the dead child, whereas in *Curse* and *True West* it is some past transgression that is hard to pin down. It is, nevertheless, part of the genetic makeup of the family; an ambiguous inheritance.

In *Paris, Texas* we learn of Travis's treasured memory of a piece of land he had bought in Texas, outside the town called Paris, in the middle of nowhere, a land, which is most probably worthless. Travis cherishes the image of it, keeping it in his mind as well as in the photograph. In *Curse,* Weston acquires a lot that is worthless. Shepard touches upon mythology of the American Dream, on the concept of owning land as a sign of wealth, prosperity, a mark of status. The aspect of ownership, the implication of success is common in Shepard. It is connected to the doctrine of hard work, progress, wealth, is equaled with well-being, success, happiness. There is a hint of the Puritanical heritage symbolized here by the elm tree. The oppressive elm trees in *Desire Under the Elms* are mentioned again in *Salesman* and more importantly in *Buried Child* where there are "the shapes of dark elm trees."[8] The Puritanical ideals are embodied in Willy as he tries to make his boys to be as successful as he never has been, to "knock them dead", to be well-liked, to sell as his 84-year old role model salesman. Dodge expresses similar notion when scolding his son: "Why did you come back here for? […] You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural."(78) It is a resonance of Willy's manly repartee while talking to Linda about Biff: "Why did he come home […] Not finding himself at the age of thirty-four is a disgrace!"[9] Both fathers propagate the doctrine of hard work, independency, rugged individualism so much imbedded in American psyche. It is linked with the idea of masculinity that comprises the above qualities. It suggests the following: physical and mental fitness, ability to endure the affliction of pain, ambition, virility. As Christopher Forth asserts, masculinity is usually complemented with muscularity, the cult of appearance.[10] Tilden used to be valiant

[8] Shepard, *Child* 63.
[9] Miller 2114.
[10] Christopher E.Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 5.

sportsman, "All-American, don't forget that. Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which."[11] It was the right path to glorious potential, the hope contained in the promise for his bright future. Biff in *Salesman* is described in like terms as a sportsman with prospects, captain of the team, a budding winner. The masculine figure that is also muscular, wins the day. The appearance-is-all attitude is not only Willy Loman's, it is imbedded in the core of the masculine ideal.

Christopher Forth describes the cult of masculinity, the development of the notion throughout the centuries in the *Masculinity in the Modern West*. He claims, throughout the centuries some reiterating patterns existed. Masculinity has been focused on white man bodies, "its 'natural' strength and endurance […] endurance of pain, of stress (stress was actually considered 'spice of life'), […] fighting obesity, stressing exercise."[12] The male body analyzed, he claims,

> revolves around the physical attributes and capacities that, according to traditions whose roots extend into the pre-modern era, have been closely associated with the qualities that the man ought to possess. Bravery, strength, endurance and sexual potency figure prominently […] as do grace, beauty and harmony of form. […] The male body is conceptualized as an ideally bounded entity, equipped with psychological and physical resources that maintain a sharp distinction between self and other while containing aspects of emotional life. [13]

To attain this ideal becomes nearly impossible for Shepard's characters: something, and all those dreams and aspiration of the parents, went astray. Lee is a drifter without job and address. Bradley parasites on his parents and Tilden, the oldest of the farmhouse boys, became 'a trouble', left home and lived in New Mexico where he did not do well, went to jail and then returned home. Biff was a promise but suddenly started to do poorly at school and later could not keep a job. He tends towards stealing and is even prompted by his father. Biff claims that he "stole [himself] out of every good job since high school." [14] Tilden claims he had been kicked out of New Mexico for that and does not want to be kicked out of Illinois. Lee and Austin are stealing in the neighborhood. Why? The answer lies in the issue of masculinity. Stealing reflects the worsen possibility to achieve, the impatience and frustration about the hard work unrewarded and offers transient satisfaction in assertion of person's masculinity; the unconscious protest against the system. Sexuality and aggression is often said to be suppressed by the civilization and the masculinity is presented as "softened" by commercial society; the threat of "effeminacy". This might be the reason why the modern era stresses the reinstatement of masculinity. It seems to be undermined by consumerism,

[11] Shepard, *Child* 72.
[12] Forth, 205.
[13] Forth, 8-9.
[14] Miller 2172.

complacency and commodity culture. The post-war period, as an era of the organizational man, with the tendency of unification and specialization, moving from outside inside, from physical labor to sedentary jobs thus seems destabilize the masculinity and produces the feeling of "longing for simpler realities that have been deemed 'lost' as a casualties of the modern world."[15] It implies also return to the simple and primitive and explains the popularity of characters whose

> relationship with civilized refinement were typically complex, from the suave refinement of James Bond to the impressive muscular feats of Hercules and Tarzan [or] the mesomorphic superman, the champion bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger during the 1970s. [16]

It explains the contradictory pull in *Salesman*, where Biff is torn between the idealized country, the primitive life, and the business world of his father - longing for the simple reality, ready to prove his own worth by acting like a man.

Masculinity is closely connected to identity. All male Shepard's characters grapple with the issue of identity. Their frequent transformations are pointing to the identity crisis. It seems to arise from the ubiquitous loss in society. In the modern drama the search for self-definition is a key issue. The one identity that is implied by society appears unsatisfactory – it is the narrow definition of an individual along the lines of material success; not only narrow but also limiting. It is the success Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, or Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream* has fallen for. Richard Gilman, in the introduction to collection of Shepard's seven plays, implies that Shepard's character's search of identity, the quest for finding out who they are is just another name for a quest for a role. We all, he continues

> either take our places in a drama and discover ourselves as we act, or we remain unknown.[…] Not to be able to act, to be turned away from the audition, is the true painful condition of anonymity. But to try to act too much, to wish to star, the culmination and hypertrophy of the common desire, is a ripeness for disaster.[17]

The desire to have an audience is closely connected with not falling into oblivion. It suggests that if a person is heard his role is sustained and the identity asserted. The fear of void forces characters to speak. As Tilden claims "you gotta talk or you'll die […] I found that out in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but I lost my voice."[18] Gilman asserts that "to be silent is to be dead"[19] and by the act of speech it is postponed. Other characters are also fighting the silence. Willy in *Salesman* and Amanda in *Menagerie* are thus creating part of their identity.

---

[15] Forth, 219.
[16] Forth, 220-221.
[17] Richard Gilman, "An Introduction" in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981) xxi.
[18] Shepard, *Child* 78.
[19] Gilman, xxi.

Martha and George in *Woolf* try to fill the emptiness with words and, whether they like it or not, be dependant on each other.

Examining modern American play means, unavoidably, scrutinizing the American Dream. The difficulty appears to be the nature of the American Dream. It is too closely focused to material success, money, and wealth. Gilman describes that

> having money is both a form of and a means to identity; it lets you act. More than that, money makes itself felt in America as a chief agency of the distortion of the human theater; it forces people into roles and out of them, and by its presence or absence it dictates the chief values of our dramas. The very pursuit of it, beyond sustenance, flattens out selves, converts them into instances of success or failure, makes the play we are in single-minded and soulless. [20]

Using the metaphor of a role for identity and theater for life he hints on the fundamental problem. The Dream has petrified, it has become only monetary value. This narrow definition tries to pigeonhole individuals, to conform to this definition. If the old period is replaced with the modern, post-war era with all its implications, it also brings this simplification that amounts to money worship. This new glitzy god has replaced the old one that was too obsolete because humanistic. It also foreshadows the world of the next playwright, David Mamet: the environment of merciless capitalism where human worth is measured mainly against the performance and making money is the most sacred activity.

[20] Gilman, xxv.

2.4 David Mamet

The youngest of the above playwrights shares with them in many respects in the treatment of the family. The only distinction is that Mamet does not deal with the family per se, but with its surrogate. In *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* no nuclear family is present; there are only distant echoes of this institution. The family proper is replaced by quasi family that consists of temporary unions, interests groups or coteries. These, nevertheless, serve the familial purpose as they resemble the functions and distribution of role in the unit. The surrogate father is usually someone older (based on age or seniority) and supposedly more experienced. The father figure is also substituted on the ground of business hierarchy and power he possesses. The relationship between Don Dubrow and Walter Cole, called Teach in *American Buffalo* are, in theory, brothers. This closeness is, however, undermined here by characters contradictions, in the disjunction between words and action. It is completely denied in *Glengarry Glen Ross* where no trace of friendship remains except competitiveness. The male camaraderie and rivalry prevail in Mamet's world and the feminine aspect is reduced, marginalized or nonexistent. The prevalent features are masculinity, business, aggressive interaction, violence, power struggle and competition. As Bigsby contends it is "a world full of petty criminals, dubious salesmen, gangsters, actors, [and] urban cowboys."[1]

What Mamet's protagonist also shares with the previous plays is the feeling of loss. "His characters look for some kind of meaning to random events and try to generate order out of threatening chaos."[2] Their search for meaning is frantic at times, accompanied by violent attacks, betrayals, venality and self-concern. They seem to be lost in their limited world of limited possibilities. Their moral universe is warped and the sole concern is narrowed solely to monetary issues. The focus rests on making money, getting rich whatever way suitable. They do not remember or have forgotten normalcy, common interaction and trust implied in mutual respect. No genuine connection seems to work here; the sense of common friendship is tainted, formally and verbally proclaimed, but then corrupted in physical act. Characters seem to have lost their continuity; they live in the immediate present and for the immediate future; they are entrapped in the present moment. There is no past that would explain their present, no roots and heritage. All they have inherited is this harsh and brutal business world.

In Mamet, there is one chief motivation spelled out clearly: money. Money and power are the most pronounced incentives of the characters. Christopher Bigsby illustrates the key

[1] Christopher Bigsby, "David Mamet: All True Stories", *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 203.
[2] Bigsby, *David Mamet* 205.

aspect of Mamet's plays of "money [as] a motivating force and a metaphor"[3], here in a larger framework. He contends that America is based on fantasies, on something that exists as mere substitution of reality. According to him America is

> compounded of myths to do with freedom and equality, of yeoman farmers and sturdy individuals, of spirituality and material enterprise. It propounds a dream of increased wealth and perfectibility; it propounds a singular identity forged out of difference. It talks to itself in the dark for reassurance about its special status.[4]

David Mamet "explores the myth of capitalism"[5] in his works and its detrimental effect upon those who are subjugated to it. But it is a myth whose implications are severely contracted to only a few limited aspects.

2.4.1 Business Betrayals–*American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*

As Matthew Roudané observed,

> *American Buffalo* is a breakthrough play. Mamet is at his best when exploring the relationship between the American ethic of business and the ways in which such a problematic ethos affects the individual.[6]

Monetary concerns are the central theme of both plays. In the earlier play it is a nickel, which is the center of the play. In the latter it is a successful salesmanship that entails making money by selling valueless land. In both the characters have no scruples in being ready to do all necessary to achieve what they want. *American Buffalo* is set in a junk store owned by Don. He has two other associates, Teach and Bob. Don is the group's patriarch, leading, planning, making decisions. His young ward, Bob, former drug addict, is at hand and performs daily errands. He serves as Don's surrogate son, and Don cares about his well being, educates him in common issues.

> […] the important thing is can you deal with it, and can you learn from it. *Pause*. And this is why I'm telling you to stand up. It's no different with you than with anyone else. Everything that I or Fletcher know we picked up on the street. That's all business is…common sense, experience, and talent. […] that's what business is […] people taking care of themselves.[7]

---

[3] Bigsby, *David Mamet* 206.
[4] Bigsby, *David Mamet* 200.
[5] Bigsby, *David Mamet* 201.
[6] Matthew Roudané,"Betrayal and Friendship: David Mamet's American Buffalo", in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 58.
[7] David Mamet, *"American Buffalo"*, *Mamet Plays: One – Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Squirrels, American Buffalo, The Water Engine, Mr Happiness*, (London: Methuen, 1994) 153-4.

Later, Don talks about the importance of the difference between two basic concepts that should not be mixed, which sounds like advice out of cheap third-rate self-help book or business-for-dummies.

> Don ‘Cause there’s business and there’s friendship, Bobby…there are many things, and when you walk around you *hear* a lot of things, and what you got to do is keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what. Or else the rest is garbage, Bob, because I want to tell you something.
> Bob Okay.
> Don Things are not always what they seem to be
> Bob I know.
> *Pause*
> Don There’s lotsa people on this street, Bob, they want this and they want that. Do anything to get it. You don’t have friends *this* life…You want some breakfast?
> Bob I’m not hungry
> *Pause*
> Don *Never* skip breakfast, Bob. (154)

Teach is Don’s friend and associate and borders on being surrogate brother with both protagonists. Faithful to his nickname, he spreads platitudes about the business conduct, suspiciously similar rhetoric as Don uses. Teach maintains that

> friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing, and I am all for it. I have never said different, and you know me on this point. Okay. But let’s just keep it *separate* huh, let’s keep the two apart, and maybe we can deal with each other like human beings. (162)

Teach seems to espouse the notion of fair business dealings, pointing out the virtue of Don taking care of Bob. “What are we saying here? Loyalty. *Pause*. You know how I am on this. This is great. This is admirable.”(182) He tries to curry favors with Don and persuade him to abandon the idea of doing the business only with Bob. He talks about “a business proposition”, “division of labor”, “Security. Muscle. Inteligence.” All phrases seem to come out of business blue-book and raise an air of decency and even nobility. The irony is that this business that is about to be conducted is mere theft. Don learnt that a buffalo-head nickel he had in his store is of greater value than he has ever expected. After the transaction Don’s scout, Bob, learns where the supposed collector lives and Don hatches a plan for a burglary. The discrepancy between the proper business conduct and the actual plan points to two aspects: the superficiality of the relationship and the divorce in moral standards. Theft has been elevated on the level of normal business and being petty criminal means becoming a businessman. Not only do they engage in the illegal activity, but they, later on in the play, try to deceive each other. Don was not going to include Teach in his plan, even though he belongs to the “family”. Teach, later, persuades Don to exclude Bob from the act. Don, himself, denies to Bob they are going to execute the plan. This behavior reveals mutual distrust as well as their greed and unwillingness to share, if it concerns money. The whole

plan does not materialize as Don discovers Bob had been lying about the man that he had not seen him leave the apartment and thus the plan cannot be carried out. Bob has outdone their previous deceits by deceiving them as well. Their mutual trust has been broken, the plan goes under and, as in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* it just them that is left, their true selves and disclosed betrayals. Now they have to face each other without all the pretences and role-playing. Teach, nevertheless, cannot bear Bob's truths, nor Bob's fabrications, therefore destroys Don's shop in a fit of frustration:

> Teach *picks up the dead-pig sticker and starts trashing the junkshop*.
> The Whole Entire World.
> There Is No Law.
> There Is No Right And Wrong.
> The World Is Lies.
> There Is No Friendship.
> Every Fucking Thing. (253-254)

The personal integrity, trustworthiness and moral standards have been damaged. The characters' narrow focus on material objects and gain results, according to Bigsby, in "corrupting the moral knowledge for the sake of mythological ideal." [8] The unrestrained capitalism thus can be said to advocate vice as a value, elevates the wrongdoing to personal initiative and sanctifies Teaches definition of the freedom of the individual:

> To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit […] in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit […] the country's *founded* on this […] without this we're just savage shitheads in the wilderness […] sitting around some vicious campfire. [9]

Teaches proclamations about business conduct, his personal codes "don't confuse business with pleasure," "a guy can be too loyal", or "it's kickass or kissass" sound ironic in the light of his actual behavior. He acts his idealized self as he desperately tries to impress his associate and connect in some meaningful way. The fact he curries favors, shows feign respect and restrains himself in not attacking physically and verbally, points to this deeply rooted desire to have a genuine connection with someone. Similarly Don, who tries to connect by helping Bob, acts the caring father figure and responsible business associate. All this façade is broken once troubles arise and the inevitably difficult question appears: who is going to be left out? Then all the civilized manners are shaken off and the true character shows - the character that is produced by the harsh environment, the pressure of the myth of success. The bond between men breaks, the surrogate family disintegrates into isolated individuals. It is due to the pressure of the myth of perfectibility that seems to have become an indisputable and

[8] Bigsby, *David Mamet* 7.
[9] Mamet, *American Buffalo* 221.

automatic thing. The guarantee of success is count on and the failure of it realization leaves the characters betrayed and lost. This feeling then presses on the relationships and families that can rarely withstand the pressure.

Bigsby quotes Mamet on the *American Buffalo* as follows:

> The play is about the American ethics of business […] about how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business. I felt angry about business when I wrote the play. I used to stand at the back of the theater and watch the audience as they left. Women had a much easier time with the play. Businessman left it muttering vehemently about its inadequacies and pointlessness. But they weren't really mad because the play was pointless – no one can be forced to sit through and hour-and-a-half of meaningless dialogue – they were angry because the play was about them." [10]

Mamet, as Arthur Miller, shows the imperatives of society at work, the monetary version of the American Dream. The common feature of *Death of a Salesman* and its newer Chicago version, Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, illustrates similar obsessions. The success in making money is the driving force. It is getting rich regardless the tactics and methods, the end-justifies-the-means technique. In *Salesman*, Ben's advice of "never fight fair with a stranger"[11] seems to be the chief maxim for salesmen in *Glengarry*. This play is, however, much harsher version of *Salesman*. It is a place of desks, phones, monthly contests, "leads", "sits", "cold calls", "closing"; a place of psychological abuse and unscrupulous language, as well as battleground where language is a weapon to beat the others. Their language and conduct also divide the world into "we" and "them". "We" concept is in constant battle to overpower "them"; whether it means the faceless company they work for or their customers. In the latter case they take advantage of their gullibility and sell them a worthless piece of land. Owning a piece of land is one of the stepping stones to success, the mark of status of being successful. Land is important in *Salesman*, where Linda says "we should've bought the land next door" [12] as it is in Shepard's *Paris, Texas*, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West*. Salesmen in *Glengarry* capitalize on this belief. They exploit the tenets of the Dream to gain money. Under the veneer of helping to make someone else rich, they get rich themselves. But these salesmen are exploited themselves it is the company that gets rich and dictates the conditions. In a closer look even the "we" starts to dissolve. As occupants of one office, they could form a surrogate family, except that their relationship is based on ceaseless competition, manipulation, open hostility and plotting.

---

[10] Christopher Bigsby, "David Mamet" *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume 3 Beyond Broadway* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 268.

[11] Arthur Miller. "Death of a Salesman," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 6th ed., Nina Baum, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 2131.

[12] Miller, 2115.

The relationships have lost their human extent. It is reflected in the language the characters use. Full of profanities, expletives and ellipses, it points to the corrupted, nevertheless effective communication teeming with deceits and cunning traps. The salesmen are great manipulators also among themselves. Words are artillery, their "stories are business tactics."[13] The content is primarily masculine, stressing the need to behave and talk like a man. What it amounts to is a mixture of vulgarity (at times of homophobia and racism) and powerful skills to manipulate others. Moss is a good example of a cunning manipulator.

Moss	You're absolutely right, and I want to tell you something.
Aaronow	What?
Moss	I want to tell you what somebody should do.
Aaronow	What?
Moss	Someone should stand up and strike *back*. [...] Someone should rob the office.
Aaronow	Huh.
Moss	That's what I'm *saying*. We were, if we were that kind of guys, to knock it off, and *trash* the joint, it looks like robbery, [...]
Aaronow	Yes. I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just ...
Moss	No, we're just ...
Aaronow	We're just '*talking*' about it.
Moss	We're just *speaking* about it. (Pause.) As an *idea*.
Aaronow	As an idea.
Moss	Yes.
Aaronow	We're not actually *talking* about it.
Moss	No.
Aaronow	Talking about it as a ...
Moss	*No*.
Aaronow	As a *robbery*.
Moss	As a 'robbery'?! No. […]
Aaronow	Why are you doing this to me, Dave? Why are you talking this way to me? I don't understand. Why are you doing this at *all* ...?
Moss	That's none of your fucking business [...] You *went* for it. [...]
Aaronow	You need money? Is that the ...
Moss	Hey, hey, let's just keep it simple, what I need is not the ... what do *you* need ...?
Aaronow	[...] What is the, you said that we were going to *split* five ...
Moss	I lied. (Pause.) Alright? My end is *my* business. [...] In or out. You tell me, you're out you take the consequences. [...]
Aaronow	And why is that?
Moss	Because you listened. [14]

Mamet's language is used for domination and manipulation. The salesmen behavior is ruthless, with one chief end – to overpower and possibly destroy the enemy. The competitions is leaving behind those not strong enough. Their constant allusions to masculinity, to being a man, refer to roughness of the environment with contempt for anything unmanly. It is a "men's game" and only real men can do it. Being helpful and compassionate is considered weakness, whereas manliness and exploitation is the right

[13] Christopher Bigsby, "David Mamet", *Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 31.

[14] David Mamet, „"Glengarry Glen Ross" in *The Norton Anthology of American English*. 6th ed., Nina Baum, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 2519-2522.

mode of acting. The presented ABC of selling: Always Be Closing, the popular salesmen maxim, shows their sole interest.

The identity is clearly defined only in monetary value. Success or failure is measured by the amount they make. The pressure on performance is enormous and the result can be either of the two: win or lose. Under any circumstance they must persuase the client and bring the signed contract. The men in the office are thus reduced to mere machines; tireless, emotionless robots.

All the pressure and tireless effort has a great impact on the individuals and their families. Even though the family is not directly mentioned, there are some hints pointing to it. Roma, the smoothly talking and ruthless character persuaded Mr.Lingk who agreed on the deal but now is coming back to revoke it.

Lingk	I don't have the *power*. (*Pause*.) I said it.
Roma	What power?
Lingk	The power to negotiate [the deal]. (2530)

By abolishing the deal between the two men, Lingk not only humiliates himself, but on the top of not having the power to perform it he strips himself of his masculinity. Lingk's wife, faceless and absent during the whole play, has the power to change life of these men. Similarly faceless as the company leaders, she manages to influence the course of events and becomes an important force from behind the scene. She is the protective force of the family in contrast to her husband, the gullible and easily persuaded emasculated male. The family has to be protected in the harsh world fighting for survival against the subversive methods of salesmen and not to be pulled into a dangerous game where the stronger wins.

As the Mrs.Lingk maneuvers her husband, Levene's life is also influenced by an absent woman. Levene mentions the name of his daughter at times, especially when feeling lost or cornered, when nothing else, even the harshest language becomes ineffective. This is an emotionally charged appeal directed to the goodwill of the other person. Its secondary function is identified, ignored, and brutally attacked. It is because Levene attempted to use a weapon that is strictly prohibited from the world of men. The two examples of women, absent yet powerful, shows the divide of the men's and other world, where the other, be it the family or an individual, is endangered by the real-estate predators. Men associated with feminine feelings are ostracized, ignored, scorned, disempowered and metaphorically castrated.

Levene is also quite close to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. A garrulous salesman, who espouses the old style salesmanship based on a smile, smooth and friendly talk free of profanities, reminiscent of Willy Loman who "rides a smile and shoeshine". Levene's sales are slumping, and on the record of sales, Levene is at the bottom. As Willy, he denies his failure, even though aware of it.

Levene	I *will* close. […] I can get hot. You *know* that.
Williamson	Not lately you can't…
Levene	Fuck that. That's defeatist. Fuck that. Fuck it….Get on my side. *Go* with me. Let's *do* something (2513)

If he does not succeed, he will be fired so he resorts to a desperate action of stealing the new leads. With no mercy, Williamson, who discovered Levene's wrongdoing, threatens to hand him to police. For his personal attacks he is attacked back as retribution. He double-crosses and is double-crossed. Before handed to police Levene feebly protests:

Levene	Don't.
Williamson	I'm sorry.
Levene	*Why*?
Williamson	Because I don't like you.
Levene	John: John:…my *daughter*…
Williamson:	Fuck you. (2541)

The system inside the office is merciless, punishes any transgression and retaliates for the mutual hostilities. The implications are not limited to the one real-estate office. As Benedict Nightingale contends " it is certainly worth emphasizing that Mamet's portrayal of the microcosmic real-estate office reflects, indeed embodies, his views about the macrocosm outside."[15]

Mamet is also similar to other playwrights in exploring the microcosmic environment and pointing to a larger picture. His nuclear families are so marginal that they are almost impalpable, substituted by temporary units. Still, the pressure is steady and stems from world of greed powered by the American mythology that has already become the reality.

[15] Benedict Nightingale, "*Glengarry Glen Ross*", *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2004) 93.

Conclusion

The family is a victim of myths promulgated by the society. It is the hub of activity and action, a comprehensive unit that represents both genders, depicts different generations and their contesting philosophies, it is a battleground of ideas, stereotypes, myths, and a seat of intimacy. It reveals a lot about the family life and conduct that is governed by outside influences, usually represented by society or its popular beliefs. It also contributes to the outside as it is the fundamental cornerstone of society.

There is a certain development palpable in the picture of the family in the analyzed modern plays. The disruption that is evident in Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams is deepened in later plays. The familial structure breaks down physically and ideologically. Father figures are ineffective or absent, failing in transmission of beliefs and values to the next generation, failing their role as breadwinners (become breadlosers), left despondent and mentally broken to their physical or metaphorical death. Mothers try to compensate for the loss. Linda in *Death of a Salesman* selflessly and utterly supports her husband, the family patriarch, caters to all his needs and by doing so worsen the whole situation. In acting as an ideal wife and mother she fails to see the change that has happened and the need to accommodate to it. Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* is abandoned wife who attempts to fit the role of a mother as well as of the missing father. The mounting pressure on Willy and Amanda result in the fact they develop similar symptoms that resemble schizophrenia. The pressure is on children too. The philosophy of their parents is, however, in sharp contrast with their own ideas and they fight the indoctrination they face. It comes both from within the family and the outside. The changing conditions, different realities are impossible to overlook.

The deep changes in society have had enormous effect upon the family. The urbanized world, that replaced the rural, brings different challenges the family needs to cope with. The altered realities, however, are not complemented with changes in the world of ideas. The old concept, myth and models survive the change unaltered. The ideas that worked in the past of small farmers, self-sufficient rugged individuals, and brave frontiersmen do not apply now. The myths that governed the society still free of limitations are now challenged and harshly scrutinized. The fact their functionality and validity is impaired feeds back to all aspects of life and inevitably to the family. The modern family is thus left with dilemma: how to continue in the tradition that is the cornerstone of the nation, the building block of the society, but which starts to lose its validity and universality. No wonder the outcome of the new

reality is dubious and schizophrenic. Here, the family starts to be severely challenged, for the disrupted continuity is impossible to be accepted by the older generation. They represent the older untainted idea of America. Children, the new generation, find the old unacceptable. They are sensitive to the changes and perceive the fictional nature of the basic concepts. Similarly lost as their parents they desperately look for meaning somewhere, usually ending in the impasse.

The family, as a small unit of a bigger body is the microcosm where things (do not) work certain way, which points to the metonymical picture of the macrocosm of the society. The unit is hence a miniaturized society illustrating its ills. On a small scale the bigger is implied. The comprehensiveness is ensured not only in representation of both sexes and generations; in the family, there is the aspect of intimacy and openness that is missing with society. The dilemmas and problems in the family are, naturally, exposed in more straightforward manner than in the wider society. The characters are shown in their "masks" while dealing on the outside, which, sharply contrasts with the intimate, almost voyeuristic, view of the inside of their homes and, indeed, the inside their bedrooms; in case of Willy Loman even inside his head (the working title of *Death of a Salesman*).

The family is among the best illustrations of the changing times. As an intimate union it represents the true impact the changed conditions have encompassed. It has much to do with the American mythology, with the American Dream. It is this elusive ideal coupled with professed promises of the land of plenty. But the end of the nineteenth century proved it wrong. It is connected to the closing of the Frontier when the limitless became limited and abundance for all changed into scarcity. Industrialization and urbanity began to change people's lives. Conditions and reality changed. But what have stayed unchanged or unchallenged were the myths connected to America. The idea of perfectibility, equality, happiness, success, has been scrutinized by the modern times. These ideas also keep influencing the characters in the plays, shaping their lives and conduct of the families.

The intertwining myth with reality was challenged by modern artists of many genres. This work does not study the impact of all artistic fields, but it has been narrowed to focus on some plays of the Modern American Theater centered on family, and which, nevertheless, shares similar implications with other modernists. Modern artist were perceptive of the profound changes and in search for adequate depiction to grasp the changed realities. So did the modern drama – different methods and representations have challenged the myths of American lives. As many modern novels, plays of the modern theater depict the reality that is based on fiction. Characters are living lives guided by mythology. They are in the grip of mythological

concepts that had been spawned as utopia long before the American continent had been discovered. After the discovery of America the experiment in utopian thoughts had had its place to happen. Religious and economic freedoms, equality, unlimited possibilities, limitless prospects, immeasurable land, inexhaustible resources, all that seemed to be true about the land. Its cornucopian quality has attracted many and for some time seemed to be valid. The myths of new Eden were, however, challenged by the spatial and human limits.

"America […] is a fiction. More than most societies it existed as idea before being realized as fact and fact had then to be pulled into line with myth"[1] Christopher Bigsby asserts. He draws upon an essay on "Fiction and Reality" by Mario Vargas Llosa, who talks about magical realism as a natural product of societies that still have difficulty to differentiate between fiction and reality. Bigsby suggest the same about America. The difficulty in differentiation in America, however, did not result in the above literary form. The ubiquitous feeling of loss is caused by the spatial and psychological limitations described above as well as due to excessive reliance on the dysfunctional mythology. The mythology that has been accepted by the family and that has reshaped its form, size and functions.

[1] Christopher Bigsby, "David Mamet: All True Stories" in *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000)199.

Bibliography:

Albee, Edward. *Stretching My Mind*. New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2006.

Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* New York: A Signet Book, 1962.

Albee, Edward. *The American Dream*. New York: Signet Book, 1961.

Beck, Ervin. "Allegory in Edward Albee's The American Dream" Goshen College, Faculty Publication, 1996. 21 December 2006 <http://www.goshen.edu/facultypubs/DREAM.html>

Berghe, Pierre L.van den. *Man In Society: A Biosocial View*. Elsevier, New York, 1975.

Bigsby, C.W.E.,ed. *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Volume I, Beginnings to 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Volume II, Williams/Miller/Albee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama Volume III: Beyond Broadway.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1990.

Bigsby, C.W.E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Bigsby, C.W.E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Cohen, Abner. Two-Dimensional Man: *An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Cohn, Ruby. *Edward Albee*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.

Esslin, Martin. *Absurd Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967.

Flatley, Guy. "Edward Albee Fights Back," *New York Times* 18 April 1971, 12 June 2003 <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10B1FF73A5F127A93CAA8178FD85F458785F9&scp=1&sq=18+April+1971+albee&st=p>

Forth, E. Christopher. *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Gilman, Richard. *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays: An Introduction.* Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981.

Mamet, David. *A Life in the Theatre.* New York: Grove Press, 1977.

Mamet, David. *Mamet Plays: One – Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Squirrels, American Buffalo, The Water Engine, Mr. Happiness.* London: Methuen, 1994.

Mamet, David. *Mamet Plays: 3 – Glengarry Glen Ross, Prairie Du Chien, The Shawl, Speed-The-Plow*. London: Methuen, 1996.

Roundané, Mathew C., *Understanding Edward Albee.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Rondané, Mathew C. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

Shepard, Sam. *Seven Plays.* New York: Dial Press, 1981.

Tindall, George Brown and Shi, David E. *America: A Narrative History*, 6th ed. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2004.

Tyler, Elaine May. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era.* New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Vorlicky, Robert. *Act Like a Man – Challenging Masculinities in American Drama*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Williams, Tennessee. *Penguin Plays: The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Sweet Bird of Youth.* New York: Penguin Books, 1959.

Nina Baum, ed. et al.,. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 6th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Konspekt / Abstract

Tato práce analyzuje americkou rodinu v kontextu společnosti a jejich požadavků. Předmětem analýzy jsou stěžejní kanonické hry moderního poválečného amerického dramatu. Řadí se mezi ně tito autoři: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard a David Mamet.

Dramatiky lze rozdělit do dvou výrazných skupin, které jsou si tematicky velmi blízké. V první skupině je Tennessee Williams a Arthur Miller, kteří poukazují na rodinu pod rostoucím tlakem jak zevnitř tak zvenku. Rodina se rozpadá, členové rodiny se snaží uniknout dusivé atmosféře domova a tím rodina ztrácí svou důležitou funkci. Tlak je výslednicí působení několika sil, hlaví z nich je hluboce zakořeněná americké mytologie, která je nedílnou součástí společnosti a která silně ovlivňuje i rodinu. Společným tématem první skupiny je pocit ztráty. Tento má dvě dimenze - prostorovou a temporální.

Druhá skupina dramatiků popisuje stejné téma ztráty a jeho prostorové a časové dopady. Tyto dramatiky spojuje charakteristický styl a účel používání jazyka, který zachycuje převládající pocit zkázy, apokalypsy, marnosti a pustoty. Hledání vlastní identity je je v hrách naznačeno stejně jako neblahý účinek drsného kapitalistického prostředí působící na rodinu.

Hry popisují svazky v kontextu poválečných padesátých let, kdy rodina byla považována a ctěna jako něco posvátného. Rodina take hraje důležitou roli ve vnitřní politice a ideologii země. Na povrchu ale ideální obraz rodiny trpí mnoha trhlinami. Inzerované štěstí a bezpečnost jsou kontrastovány s smutkem a nejistotou, úspěch je přemožen neúspěchem. Rozpor mezi oficiálním obrazem rodiny a skutečnou realitou je velmi markantní. Pozdější dramatici pokračují v zobrazení rozpadu rodiny, hledání vlastní identity a redifici maskulinity ve světě, kde neplatí co platilo.

Rodina a její validita jsou zpochybněny. Role rodiny jako úhelného kámene amerického života a společnosti je podkopána. Jedním z hlavních důvodů rozpadu jsou mýty týkající se amerického snu. Obrovský tlak a nadměrné požadavky, které jsou společností vyžadovány, které jsou daným status quo, mají za následek pokračující dezintegraci rodiny až její téměř vymizení. Místo běžného modelu se objevují náhradní rodiny, který se skládají z dočasných zájmových skupin a kotérií.

This work analyses the American family in context of society and its demands. It focuses on the cannonical works of the Modern American drama, namely plays of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet.

The playwrights are analysed in two distinctive groups according to similar themes they share. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller depict the family under increasing pressure from the outside as well from the inside. The unit disintegrates, members of the family escape and thus the unit loses its funtions. The pressure is imposed by the tenets of the American mythology that governs the society, which, in turn, influences the family. The common theme of the first group of playwrights is the feeling of loss. This comprises of two dimensions – spatial and tempoval.

The second group of playwrights share the same theme of loss with its spatial and temporal implications. They are characteristic by their distinctive use of language that depicts the prevalent sense of doom, apocalypse, futility and sterility. The search for identity is also implied by the restlessness of characters. The detrimental effect of harsh business environment on the family is explored with regards to masculinity.

The work shows the family in the context of the 1950s, an era when the family was elevated to sacred institution and which were, allegedly, the best times for the unit well-being. The family plays an important role in the national politics and ideology. On the surface the ideal picture suffers a fracture in reality, and under the happiness is contrasted with saddness and loss. The discrepancy between the official representation and actual reality is highlighted. Later playwrights continue in depiction of the family disintegration that still continues.

The family is challenged as the very cornestone of the American life. The myths around the American dream are the main reasons for disintegration. The enormous pressure, the excessive demands that are imposed by the society result in continous crumbling and eventual disappearing of the family per se. It is replaced by surrogate families, composed of temporary interest groups and coteries.